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STORY BY
Rhythm Aida
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Reincarnated as the Piggy Duke

*This Time I'm Gonna ♡
Tell Her How I Feel!*



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Reincarnated as the Piggy Duke
This Time I'm Gonna Tell Her How I Feel!



“The Piggy Duke was intelligent, strong, kindhearted, and sadly, too stubborn for his own good. From another perspective, the story of Shuya Marionette can be interpreted as his tragedy.”

—Director of Shuya Marionette

Prologue: The Dawn of Upheaval

“Don’t come any closer, Master Slowe!”

“Oink! Oink, oiiink!”

Like a mouse caught red-handed making mischief, the girl retreated as I backed her into the corner of the room. Tears gathered at the corners of her eyes as she hugged something close to her chest and shook her head.

“Master Slowe, how could you do something so cruel?!”

Let me make myself clear. The relationship between Charlotte and me has always gone off without a hitch. She always acts for my sake, as I always do for her in turn.

“Oink! Oink, oink! O-Oiiink!”

“And don’t make those orc sounds! I have no idea what you’re saying! Please speak properly!”

This was the case between us, even now. I was driving Charlotte into a corner because I wanted the best for her. To a bystander, though, it might have looked like a villain with malicious intentions closing in on a beautiful girl.

Okay, I’ll be honest. They absolutely would see me as a villain. But I have my reasons for doing this. Honestly, I do.

“Oiiink!”

“I said, I have no idea what you’re saying when you talk like that!”

“Oh, oops. Sorry about that. Whenever I get passionate about something, the orc sounds just spill out,” I mumbled. “But come on, Charlotte. Get over here and give me that wand!”

Despite being a klutz, Charlotte wanted nothing more than to become a mage worth her salt. I admired her spirit, but a wand falling into the hands of an inexperienced mage would only cause trouble. As a result, I’d asked Charlotte to hand over the potentially dangerous wand, but she was as stubborn as a mule and refused to budge.

“This wand is mine!!!” she exclaimed. “Just because I’m your retainer doesn’t mean that you can get away with doing a bad thing!”



“A bad thing?! I’m doing the right thing, I’ll have you know!”

“Are you saying that *I’m* in the wrong?!”

“That’s exactly what I’m saying! Charlotte, you’re the one who’s completely in the wrong here! So hand it oink oink!”

Shouldn’t a retainer obey all the orders their master gives them without question, you ask? Perhaps that was the norm in most cases, but it was different in House Denning.

In my family, retainers were taught to stop their master at all costs if they did something stupid, even if it meant going as far as punching them. Even if their master sustained grave injuries in the process, the retainer wouldn’t be held responsible in such a case. Such practices were probably what had earned my family the reputation of being warriors who talked with their fists.

“Charlotte, you are completely surrounded. Oink...” I cackled. “Now, hand it over.”

“I refuse! This is my spoils of war! I didn’t think you were such a cruel person, Master Slowe... It tears me apart to hear you say that!”

I sighed. Why did my morning have to start out like this? We’d been bickering like this for nearly ten minutes already, and Charlotte showed no signs of giving in.

I’d overslept this morning, which was a rare occasion for me. Since I wasn’t at my usual jogging course, Charlotte came to wake me up. I was fast asleep and didn’t hear her knocking on the door. Charlotte had to come in and force me awake. It was at that moment that I spotted the wand at Charlotte’s hip.

“*Charlotte! Where did you get a wand?! Did you steal it from someone?!*” I’d exclaimed.

It had all begun somewhere during the incident with Sepith. Charlotte claimed she’d defeated a bandit with a battle cry and then picked up his wand from the floor in the theater during that time. I’d been swarmed by a bunch of things in succession after the incident, so I’d completely forgotten about her picking up the wand.

“This wand is *mine!*”

Charlotte hugged the expensive-looking wand closer to her chest. *The previous owner had some great stuff for a bandit, huh? That thing might be of a higher caliber than even Lord Pauper’s...* No. It was definitely better quality.

“I won’t give it to anyone, not even you, Master Slowe!”

But I knew about how Charlotte had *really* gotten that wand. She insisted that this wand was her spoils of war, but how in the world would a clumsy mage like her have managed to claim it? Weeell...

“Silva told me that there was a stupid bandit who tripped over your foot and knocked himself out! Isn’t it too much of a stretch to call that wand your spoils of war?! You didn’t rightfully earn it!”

“It wasn’t a coincidence!” Charlotte argued. “Thinking back on it now, I’m pretty sure he fainted because of how intimidating I was!”

“You? Being *intimidating*? Do you hear yourself right now? ‘Charlotte’ and ‘intimidating’ don’t belong in the same sentence together. Definitely not.”

Charlotte groaned in frustration. “It doesn’t matter! I won this wand fair and square! Even *you* don’t have a say in my spoils of war, Master Slowe! It’s a rule of House Denning, and you know it!”

I gritted my teeth, unable to find a reply. “You’re sooo stubborn, Charlotte...”

Ugh, bringing up the House Denning rules? Here?! At this rate, we’d be stuck at an impasse until one of us relented. *So...*

“It can’t be helped,” I muttered at length. “I’ll let you keep it, Charlotte, but only on one condition.”

Yeah. I surrendered. I was always extremely lenient towards Charlotte; I had such a soft spot for her that I’d ended up throwing away a glorious future. Surrender was the only possible outcome of this debate. Besides, if we followed House Denning’s rules, the wand was indeed her spoils of war, and I had no right to deny her that.

“You absolutely have to give it to me before my father comes to Kirsch!”

“I know that! If the duke found out that I possessed a wand, he’d cut my salary again...” The clumsy mage shivered like a leaf in the wind, probably imagining my father scolding her in the future. “I can’t afford to live if it decreases any further...”

Though House Denning banned Charlotte from using magic, in all honesty, I’d have preferred for her to become proficient if at all possible. Since living as the blackhearted Piggy Duke hadn’t been an option anymore, I’d decided to change for the better. Charlotte would have to become an adept retainer to remain at my side.

However, sadly...the spirits that blessed us mages with magic just weren’t fond of Charlotte.

“A wand... *My* wand...” Charlotte heaved a long, relieved sigh. “I finally got my own wand...”

To make matters worse, even though Charlotte had an affinity for light magic, the light spirits pretended she didn’t exist.

“My wand...” Charlotte sighed. “Oh, right. I should carve my name into it so that anyone can see that it’s mine.”

At this rate, she might start rubbing it affectionately against her cheek.

I thought about one of the theories I'd formed as I watched Tina recently. Tina was able to manifest magic by telling the spirits her true feelings, and her skills had only shot up from there despite her commoner blood. *I'll be honest, I didn't think she'd be so successful just by telling the spirits how she felt.*

"All righty, time to practice! I'm going to try my hardest, Master Slowe!" Charlotte exclaimed.

Charlotte had once been the princess of Huzak. She'd inherited the blood of one of the noblest families, and so ordinarily spirits would gladly lend her their power. But Charlotte hid her true identity, unwilling to break out of her shell. That might've been one reason why the light spirits didn't think highly of her, meticulous creatures as they were.

This was all just speculation on my part, of course. My powers allowed me to see and hear spirits, but I still had no clue how they decided which people to lend their powers to.

"Charlotte, I'm sure you know this, but..." I called out to Charlotte, who had a spring in her step as she made her way from my room.

Even though I had that theory, I couldn't just pressure Charlotte to reveal her secret to me or tell her that she might be able to use magic properly if she did. I would wait until the day she told me of her own volition. That was one rule I'd set for myself that I absolutely would not break, after all.

"I know, I know!" she said, counting on her fingers. "Don't point my wand at people! Don't try making up spells! And don't get carried away! These three rules, right?!"

"Charlotte, I'm not finished talking yet! Hey, wait!"

"I know the gist of what you're going to say! After all, I've been a mage for over ten years, and I've been your retainer for a long time too!" my retainer said in high spirits, then thundered down the stairs. She reminded me of a kid who'd finally gotten a toy she'd been longing for.

I muttered to myself, "I really think it's about time that she gave up on magic, though..."

No. Those are bad thoughts. I fervently shook my head. *Charlotte's wanted to become a magnificent mage ever since she was a little kid! I, of all people, shouldn't be the one to deny her dream!* I looked out over the campus from my window, and I spotted Charlotte sprinting from the male dorms.

Normally there wouldn't be many people on campus this early in

the morning at Kirsch. It was too early yet for students to start coming out of their dorms...but that hadn't been the case lately.

"Look! A monster snuck into the campus!"

"It's a foolish orc! Catch it!"

I watched on in silence. Students chased a monster around, accompanied by soldiers wearing Daryth's colors. The soldiers scattered all over campus with lances and greatswords in hand. There were usually only twenty or so soldiers around campus at any given time, mainly stationed at the gates. But today, armed soldiers swarmed in droves over the school's grounds. A quick count told me there were around a hundred of them just that I could see from my bedroom window.

Was this sudden influx of soldiers because Sepith had turned out to be a traitor? No. That wasn't the case.

"Look at that beard! That's a Baron Orc! It's way smarter than your usual stupid orc, so it might be hiding weapons! Be careful!" one of the students shouted.

"Hey, stop right there!" a soldier barked. "How many times do I have to tell you that you mustn't approach monsters?!"

"Yikes, that old man is Captain Heinz! Run for it!" the student yelped.

When Charlotte, Alicia, and I had returned from Yoram, we were all rendered speechless. News of Sepith's betrayal and the subsequent cancellation of the Guardian Selection hadn't reached the campus at all. Instead, a major incident was happening at the school that made Sepith's actions pale in comparison: the existence of the dungeon in the Lost Woods that was supposed to be used in the Guardian Selection had become public knowledge.

"I wanna go into the dungeon as soon as possible! The dungeon, I said! I'll definitely come back with a treasure as grand as Flamberge, the sword of flames!"

"Don't be silly. You couldn't find treasure in broad daylight, never mind down in the dungeon. A shovel's the best you can do."

They'd announced that my father would visit the school at the same time the dungeon had come to light.

"Have you handed in your Declaration of Participation for the dungeon expedition yet?"

"Of course I have. Still, Duke Denning really lives up to his house's name; he doesn't do things by halves. Who'd have thought that we'd be able to enter a dungeon without qualifying for an adventurer license? This is a super rare opportunity!"

At first, my father was only going to check on me while he was here. But from what I could gather, despite the Order's best efforts to cover up the incident in Yoram, he'd found out both about that and

about the existence of the dungeon.

Dungeons fell under the jurisdiction of the army in principle. I'd heard my father was outraged that the Order had dared to hide its discovery for their own convenience. Since he'd be coming to the mage institute anyway, rather than just assigning a new squadron of soldiers to the dungeon, he might as well let the students cooperate since the school was so remote anyway. It would be better for everyone in the long run.

Indeed, the dungeon was also a good place to test the skills of those who wished to join the army in the future. I was admittedly impressed by my father's stroke of genius. He probably intended to directly approach promising students and invite them to enlist.

"Shuya, you're practicing magic this early in the morning too?!" one student exclaimed, exasperated. "Oh yeah, I heard that you got an adventurer license. What's it like inside a dungeon?"

"Ugh, I had kept that a secret all this time. How does *everyone* know that I am registered as an adventurer now?! This is all Professor Loco Moco's fault! This is the worst!" Shuya yelled.

"Come on, Shuya! Tell me! ...Oh! The Baron Orc made a run for it! After it!"

"Hey!" the soldier shouted in warning. "*I said*, students shouldn't approach the monsters!"

Because Kirsch was isolated from the rest of the world by an enormous forest, it was a place where young nobles could enjoy their youth away from the mundane world, even if it was just for a few years.

Even though the incident with Sepith had happened in the not-so-distant Yoram, Kirsch Mage Institute was still so peaceful that I couldn't help but shake my head.

"They're all so noisy this early in the morning," I muttered. "Just because some dungeon appeared, everyone's getting up early even though they're not used to it. My peaceful jogging life is no more, thanks to them..."

Everyone gathered at the training field early in the morning to train hard at magic so that they could perform well in the dungeon expedition. Charlotte probably had been so stubborn about giving up her wand because the sight of those students had motivated her to improve her own skills.

"Like always, Shuya's friends are surrounding him even at this undogly hour, what with him showing off that social prowess of his... I-it's not like I'm jealous of him or anything. Not at all. I have friends too... Not nearly as many, but..."

Even taking all of that into account, it was noisier out there than

usual today for some reason. I closed the window and flopped back down onto my chair with a thud.

I could guess why Charlotte was so obsessed with that wand and why she had wanted so badly to practice her magic. She wanted to prove my father wrong about being an unreliable mage when he came to the school.

My father didn't approve of Charlotte. But if Charlotte showed her improvement, she might change his opinion of her. I could agree with that sentiment, but I still doubted how well that plan would go. Charlotte was quite a klutzy mage, after all.

"Hm?" Just then, someone knocked on the door. The knock was reserved, but loud enough to make its presence known. Very few people had the need to visit my room. Though it pained me to admit it, it was because I had few friends.

"Is it Charlotte?" I thought aloud. "No, the knock sounds different." Charlotte's knocks were a lot less polite. Sometimes, if I didn't respond, she would even start banging on the door.

"Yes, yes, oink... I'm coming," I muttered as I got up. *If it's a fishy salesperson, I'll send them away immediately.* With that scheme in mind, I opened the door.

What waited for me beyond the threshold wasn't a salesman but a girl with rose-gold hair. Her large, downturned eyes blinked a few times as she stared right at me.

In contrast to Charlotte's silver hair, hers was quite eye-catching. Even so, the girl's aura was softer than every other part of her... She was rather mysterious.

She stood still as a statue, a slight smile tugging at the corner of her lips as she continued to stare.

"Oink?" My mind went blank, and we both stared at each other for a while.

Good grief. Was there always such a cute girl at this school?

No, if there was, she would be on the lips of every gossip in the school. Did she just enroll or something? But it's not the right season for enrollment. More importantly, girls aren't allowed to enter the male dorms. Very few girls are allowed to enter this building. So she's either a maid or a male student's retainer. But she's not wearing the maid's uniform, and she doesn't look like a retainer either.

And on top of that, that gorgeous rack of hers you can see through her clothes... I observed her in silence.

If I had to describe her breasts...they had the power of a mother's bosom. She hid a treasure of unparalleled power underneath her clothes, despite being a growing girl. Though she was still not old

enough to be called a mature woman, my imagination filled in the blanks, picturing a body that contrasted her...

“Ahem!”

Someone cleared their throat.

Oh. Oops. Ugh, what was I thinking? I took another look at her, this time realizing that there were burly men wearing white capes standing behind the girl.

The girl had many Royal Knights—whose colleague had been quite the thorn in my side in Yoram—attending her, and she lifted her hand to the corner of her mouth as she began to chuckle. Clearly, she was finding something hilarious about this whole situation.

“I see you get an early start in the mornings,” she said in a soft voice that befitted her gentle aura. “That, and I wanted to express my gratitude to have been in your care in Yoram.”

I realized something. *I’ve seen this girl somewhere recently... Yoram, she says? Wait a minute. No way. But...she looks exactly like the person I met briefly in Yoram.*

Huh? Is this a prank? Is someone filming my reaction or something? My mind was in shambles, and she must have found my reaction funny because that smile remained on her face even as she bowed her head at me in deference. It was then that I finally managed to shut down my endless train of thoughts and reboot.

“Th-There is no need to bow to me, so please raise your head!” I stammered.

“Finally realized who I am, have you?”

“Yes, indeed, I have! So please raise your head, Your Highness!”

This was none other than the princess of Daryth, Carina Little Daryth.

Chapter 1: The Princess of Daryth

I knew the future of this world. On top of that, if it involved characters who appeared in the anime, I could roughly guess how they'd behave with some degree of accuracy.

And yet, even with all that knowledge going for me, a few things still managed to catch me off guard. The mercenary No Face sneaking into Kirsch or Sepith Pendragon the Traitor Knight going rogue early, for instance. Still, nothing had yet strayed too far from what I knew of the anime, and the characters continued to trace the same footsteps towards their futures. I had the advantage of knowing what made them tick.

In other words, there were things that I could prepare for in advance, and because of that, I knew I had to brace myself for them.

"It's a little late for this greeting since we've spoken some already, but good morning, Slowe. Sorry for visiting this early in the morning. We've only just arrived at Kirsch, so I wanted to finish my business before people start making a fuss about us."

This, on the other hand, was completely out of left field for me. The girl in front of me right now with a few knights attending to her never appeared in *Shuya Marionette*, but she was undoubtedly an important character, nonetheless.

Even Shuya Newkern, the main protagonist, never managed to get into contact with the princess of Daryth.

"I-It is no trouble, Your Highness. I do not mind at all."

"I'm glad. I was worried that you might be still sleeping, so... I mean, you know, it would have been rude on my part to wake you up for this." Princess Carina flashed a reserved smile as she finished speaking. At first glance, she gave off a glamorous impression, perhaps because of her soft rose-gold hair, but there was something ephemeral about her.

I was used to looking at pretty girls since I saw Charlotte in my everyday life, but even someone like me would be hard-pressed not to find themselves drawn to Princess Carina.

She smells nice too, and her proportions are a sight to behold... I cut off that train of thought as I saw her heave a sigh of relief. With her sudden appearance at Kirsch, I was now sure of one thing.

“Um, Princess Carina... May I ask what business you have here at Kirsch Mage Institute?”

The fate of the world had changed greatly from the plot of *Shuya Marionette* as I knew it.

A handful of fully armed Royal Knights stood in the corridor of the fourth-floor male dorm.

“Slowe Denning, do you understand what we are requesting of you?”

“I understand well enough, yes. You are not giving me any details, which can only mean one thing.”

The princess wasn't here in the corridor with us. While the Royal Knights were explaining the situation to me, she was snooping about my room, as if everything about the dormitory was curious to her. *It's probably more accurate to say that she's ransacking my room, by the looks of it.*

“All you need to know is that you must take care of the princess while she is here at this school. Normally, the honor of being the princess's companion would never fall to a mere student. There is nothing more you could possibly ask for.”

To sum up what the knight was telling me, while the Cardinal and his entourage finished up their business in Yoram, they wanted Princess Carina to take this opportunity to interact with youngsters her age since she had very few chances to go out in public.

And so it was decided that Princess Carina would stay at Kirsch in the interim. While she was here, she needed someone other than the Royal Knights to attend to her during classes and such.

I turned out to be their prime candidate for that. As a Denning, my house status was befitting of the task. Besides that, this was the Order's way of thanking me for stopping the traitorous Sepith Pendragon in his tracks. Or so the knights had told me.

“I see,” I said at length. “In other words, you want me to be the princess's toy when she's bored.”

In the anime, however, Princess Carina had adamantly refused to go outside and become a key player. Would she really come to this school just because the Cardinal told her to?

“Watch your tongue, you scoundrel,” the knight spat. “I will cut you down if you dare say anything rude.”

“My apologies. I'm still half-asleep,” I replied, feigning innocence.

The so-called “business” that the Cardinal and the rest of the Order were taking care of in Yoram...was, without a doubt, cleaning up after Sepith. If word got out that a Royal Knight was a traitor who'd defected to Dustour's side, it would strain the relationship between Daryth and her allies.

As a result, they were going around and covering up any and all evidence that he had betrayed the Order. Judging from the exorbitant amount of spending Alicia had done lately, the Cardinal had obviously given her a handsome sum in exchange for her silence.

I, on the other hand, had received not a single word of appreciation or gratitude from anyone in the Order. In fact, the Royal Knights held a grudge against me for stopping Sepith. From their perspective, it was probably insulting that a Denning of all people had managed to outmaneuver a Royal Knight.

“What’s with that lineup of people?! The Piggy Duke’s talking to Sir Dalton, the One-Strike Knight, and that’s Sir Kushner, the Gemini Blades Knight, and there’s even Sir Delbane, the Berserker Knight!”

“There’s someone more important, though! The girl in the Piggy Duke’s room! That’s the princess herself! She’s still a Little Daryth right now, but it’s really her!”

“Hey, Sir Dalton is glaring our way!” a student hissed. “Be quiet, everyone!”

Further down the corridor, a crowd of students peered at us from the stairwell, eyeing our every move. Even Shuya was there. The students probably didn’t know what was being said in the tense exchange between me and the knights, though.

“So, which is it? Will you accept or not? Decide right here and now, Slowe Denning,” Sir Dalton demanded. “There are numerous other candidates aside from you.”

I mulled over it for a moment before making my decision. “I shall accept. It is a position of utmost honor.”

“You should’ve just agreed when we first asked instead of wasting our time...” the knight muttered. “That, and I’m sure you already know, but about the matter of Sepith—”

“I understand, Sir Dalton. I cannot say with certainty what my father would think of him, but personally, I hope that he will receive a second chance. I have no intentions of being thoughtless with this information.”

The knight paused. “I see. Then I shall say no more on the matter.”

My father already knew that the Order had invited me to join the Guardian Selection, and my mother had reprimanded me via a letter sent from back home. “*What in the world were you thinking?!*” she’d written. My mother had even scolded Charlotte for not fulfilling her duty as my retainer to stop me from going haywire. Charlotte had been quite down for a while after reading it.

Unlike me, my father would probably condemn Sepith for daring

to do such an outrageous thing to Alicia. Looking back on it now, my father had doted on Alicia quite a bit when I was engaged to her, so that sort of reaction was likely. My father and the Cardinal would be having a conversation any time now in Yoram, and I could bet it wouldn't be pretty.

I hope that I don't get dragged into all of this for no reason, but like as not that's what'll happen... I sighed inwardly.

"Hey, have you finished the boring discussion?" The princess opened the door and poked her head out. Her soft rose-gold hair flowed behind her as she moved, and she was wearing a pleasant floral perfume. And...

Thinking about her well-endowed chest would be disrespectful, so I did my best to keep my attention away from there.

"It's the Little Daryth!" a harsh whisper echoed down the corridor. "I'm from an earl house, but even I've never seen her until now!"

"Hey, don't push me, Shuya! I said don't push me! Oh wow, Sir Dalton's looking at us!"

Sepith's betrayal had been kept completely under wraps, likely due to Cardinal Maldini's intervention. The people at school hadn't heard a thing about it. They didn't know I'd been a part of the Guardian Selection, nor that Alicia had nearly been kidnapped again, nor that there was a small connection between me and the princess of Daryth now.

"Sorry, Slowe. Though we caused you a lot of trouble, I didn't get the chance to greet you properly back in Yoram. Not only that, but I'm staying at this school for a while, as I'm sure you've heard from Dalton already," Princess Carina said, bowing her head.

Immediately, Sir Dalton gave me a death glare, and his lips turned down into a severe frown behind his black beard.

Yes, yes. I know.

"Princess Carina, please raise your head," I pleaded. "And it's an honor to be your companion, Your Highness."

The princess breathed a sigh of relief. "I'm glad to hear that. Then, I am in your care from now on, Slowe."

My first impression of her was that she was quite modest, a stark contrast to her striking appearance. I'd heard from rumors that the princess was a very...difficult person, but to be honest, she seemed to be quite mature from what I'd seen so far.

Though I'd been a little snarky when I spoke to the Royal Knight earlier, it was a dream come true to be Princess Carina's companion.

The girl smiling bashfully at me was completely different from Charlotte and Alicia. So far, I had mainly been dealing with dangerous opponents like mercenaries and traitors, so this was a breath of fresh

air in my life.

“Open yer textbooks,” the professor said, scowling as he looked over the class. “How many times do I have to tell ye to pay attention, kiddos?!”

“Highland! How crass of you to speak in such a way before Her Highness! Take your job seriously!” Sir Dalton snapped.

I was Princess Carina’s companion during her stay at our school. I was sure people would complain about it, but surprisingly, nobody did. Apparently, everyone thought I was the obvious choice for the role. House Denning was undoubtedly the highest status you could get in this school, at least next to Alicia. I supposed it went unsaid that status meant everything to a school full of young nobles, huh?

“So, uh... Earth magic is especially useful in construction on the front lines, as well as when making simple army bases... Ah, oops, wrong thing. I mean—”

“Highland, can you not teach with more dignity?”

“Beardo over there is an outdated guy who looks down on earth magic,” the professor quipped. “So make sure none o’ you end up like him, all right?”

Good grief, class today sucks more than usual.

Sir Dalton, a man of large build and sporting a black beard, stood watch out in the corridor. He criticized Professor Loco Moco’s teaching style out loud from the hallway, and the professor dished it out in kind. From the looks of it, Sir Dalton was probably the professor’s superior from when he’d been in the Order. Though Sir Dalton’s reaction made sense, it was heinous to have Professor Loco Moco teach Magic Studies in the first place. Some rumors said that a handful of students had gone directly to the headmaster to protest the appointment. Others said the school was urgently looking for someone to take the post of Magic Studies professor, but who knew how long that would take?

“Why are you just standing around, Highland? Hurry up and carry on with class!”

“Damn it... Why did this epitome of a muscle head have to be the one to come to Kirsch?” the professor muttered under his breath. “Oliver’s more suitable for stuff like this, right? Someone like Dalton isn’t useful outside the battlefield...”

Professor Loco Moco was clearly done with the whole situation because after that, he did little more than read the textbook word for word aloud to the class like some kind of robot.

Still, it was hard to ignore the large number of people who were trying to get a furtive look at Princess Carina. Shuya, especially. I’d lost track of how many times he’d turned around. He did it so often

that Alicia kicked his foot in annoyance.

Oh. Alicia looked this way too. *They're both princesses. Maybe she's self-conscious because of Princess Carina?* But that theory was quickly shot down because rather than staring at Carina, Alicia only glared at me. *What?*

Princess Carina called out to me. "Hey, Slowe."

"Oink?"

"Oink?" the princess mimicked me, chuckling quietly. "You're an interesting one."



Oh, oops. Whenever I let my guard down, I ended up relapsing back into the habits of a human orc.

Princess Carina's hand was light as a feather as she wrote on the blank parts of the textbook, brushing across the paper. I peered over; her handwriting was small and modest, matching the impression I'd gotten from her.

I cleared my throat. "What is it?"

"Is Loco Moco Highland behaving like that because I'm around?"

"No, it is probably because Sir Dalton is intimidating the professor."

"Oh, I see. Those two and their antics... They haven't changed at all."

Though I'd said that to the princess, the truth was her presence probably *did* affect him. I knew from the anime that Professor Loco Moco had left the Order before he could bid farewell to the princess he was duty bound to protect...almost as if he'd fled from it all. Perhaps that was why the professor had his eyes glued to the ground and seemed to have lost his composure.

"Teach your classes seriously, Highland!"

"Oi, yer so noisy, Dalton! How many times are you plannin' on lashin' out at me?!"

Afterward, Princess Carina asked me about the professor's reputation at school. She stared at the professor as she listened, seemingly intrigued. What was going on in that mind of hers? I had no idea.

Break time was meant to be just that: a brief respite, but...

"Your Highness! Please allow me to give you a tour around campus!"

"Hey, I was here first!" Shuya elbowed the boy away. "Your Highness, my name is Shuya Newkern! If there's anything that you are unsure of during your stay at this school, please feel free to ask me!"

I couldn't even count how many people had surrounded her, and the classroom buzzed with activity the moment class was dismissed.

Several times more boys surrounded Carina than last year when Alicia had first arrived. I wasn't surprised, though, considering that this was Carina Little Daryth we were talking about. A princess that rarely showed herself in public was here at our school, of all places.

This was a rare opportunity, and if you could get close to her now, there was no telling what it might bring you in the long run. Or that was the reasoning, anyway. *Look, I get why you're all acting like this, but the desperation in your eyes is intimidating. You're coming on so strong.*

"Huh? Hmm... The princess smells really nice! What is it?" one

boy wondered out loud.

“Your Highness! What perfume are you wearing?! Is that possibly a limited line of Noin Oula?!”

Princess Carina answered each and every inquiry from the barrage of questions fired at her sincerely. Alicia sulked at her from across the room, her elbow resting on the table. Though she wasn’t too obvious about it, Alicia seemed upset. *Is she sulking because Shuya is so eager to try and get Princess Carina’s attention?*

“It would be an honor to have lunch with you, Your Highness! Ah, if the dining hall is not to your liking, my room is very much available!” Shuya exclaimed.

“Your Highness, please refrain!” Shuya’s friend warned. “The guy keeps a giant snake in his room for fortune-telling purposes!”

If I were in Princess Carina’s position, I’d lose it and start firing off spells at them. I might even have yelled something like, “Ugh, do this later!” But the princess dealt with them all with grace. I wouldn’t have been able to keep my irritation off my face if I were in her shoes.

Once again, I observed our surroundings. *Jeez, there are way more guys hanging around than when Alicia first came to school.* Did her wondrous chest and her compassionate aura make her more approachable? The furtive glances at her chest from boys were endless.

“Your Highness!” they all exclaimed, one after another, echoing each other’s words.

Oh... Princess Carina was quickly lost in the sea of people, and I couldn’t spot her at all. I sent my best wishes silently to Princess Carina, who’d become the most popular person at school in the span of just a few hours.

“Lord Slowe,” a familiar voice muttered. “She’s *very* popular.”

“It can’t be helped. Here’s a princess that rarely shows herself,” I replied. “Aren’t you going to join them to try and make an impression on her, though? You’re aiming to become a Royal Knight, right? If she takes a liking to you, that’d be one giant step towards your dream.”

Though the student I was talking to sported blond hair just as Princess Carina did, his status fell right in the middle of the school hierarchy. Lord Pauper, the heir of Viscount Greatlorde, came right up next to me and looked towards where the princess was lost in the crowd. He didn’t seem like he planned on joining the fray.

“None of them have noticed that the princess’s expression is stiff,” Valjean said, sighing. “Those guys are idiots.”

I raised an eyebrow. “You can tell?”

“Remember, I was the one who immediately noticed your change, Lord Slowe.”

“True. You observe people keenly. I have a lot to learn from you in that regard.”

Sir Dalton was as still as a statue, not even a hair in his black beard twitching where he stood in the corridor. He didn’t seem to have any plans of saving the princess from the mountain of people she was buried under.

“Lord Slowe, the princess looked our way briefly. It seems that she is asking for help. I believe that it is your job as the Overlord of Kirsch to shine in a time like this.”

“Overlord? Bah. Who’re you talking about? But yeah, I guess you have a point. They *did* ask me to take care of her, after all.”

“Take care of her? Oh. So that’s what that commotion in the male dorm this morning was about.”

“I’ll head over there. See you later, Valjean.”

I stood up and purposely thumped my foot on the ground as I walked. I couldn’t stomp as loudly as I could have before I’d lost all that weight, which was a shame, but it still had the desired effect. The people crowding around Princess Carina scattered like dandelion seeds in the wind, running away from me in fear.

“No matter how you look at it, you really are the ruler of the place,” Valjean chimed in.

Oh, shut up. I decided to ignore the words of the penniless brownnoser.

“Here you go, Princess Carina. This is your lunch.”

“Thank you, Slowe,” the princess replied at length.

“Are you sure that you are not going to eat in the dining hall? I believe they are still waiting for you.”

“What do you think would happen if I went to the dining hall now?”

“Well...” I hesitated. “It would be an even greater disaster than this morning, most likely.”

The princess’s face went stiff, probably because she’d remembered back to the catastrophe in the dining hall that morning. Nearly all the students packed themselves into the dining hall since the princess was there, resulting in unmitigated chaos. The people working there, including Charlotte, had to work their heads off to keep up because of the excessive crowd.

“I’m quite popular here, it seems. That surprised me a little.”

The students couldn’t work up the courage to talk to her when she was with me, so she was able to relax right now. But Princess Carina didn’t touch her meal at all; instead, she just spent her time staring blankly at the scenery around Kirsch. She was probably thrown off by the change in her environment, brought from the solemn palace to

such a rowdy place.

“Alicia, the Cirquistan princess who enrolled around the same time as me, was also practically a tourist attraction when she first came to Kirsch. The students here are a little starved for entertainment.”

“Oh, yes. She was in the same class as us, if I remember right. So even Princess Alicia went through what I’m going through now. I see...”

Though the curious onlookers didn’t approach us, their number only increased as time went by. There were even people who were attempting to do pencil portraits of the princess, their hands swiftly moving across their papers. From time to time, one of the so-called artists would frown. *Is that because I’m in the background as well?* I discreetly glared at the offender so that the princess wouldn’t notice; the guy literally collapsed to the ground in fear.

Oh. Tina was also among the crowd of people, her eyes sparkling. For someone like Tina, who had a very romanticized image of us nobles, a princess visiting our school must’ve been something right out of a fairy tale.

“Speaking of which, thanks for noticing earlier.”

“Huh?” I mulled over it for a moment. “Oh...that.”

Earlier, during break time, I’d scared off all the students who were swarming Princess Carina with just a threatening little stomp. I still hadn’t managed to entirely shed my reputation as the blackhearted Piggy Duke; people still feared me. On top of that, people seemed to think it’d be a death sentence to piss me off, probably because of the impression I’d left when I defeated No Face.

“Everyone runs away when you come around, huh...? That’s funny.” The princess chuckled, probably thinking back on how everyone had fled earlier. Though she was one year my senior, there was something childish about her.

Next to the princess, I started shoving my lunch into my face yet again. The Royal Knight came over at the precise moment Princess Carina finished her food, accepting her empty tableware.

“Hey, take mine there while you’re at it, Sir Dalton.” I handed over mine too, since he was taking care of hers anyway. It earned me a withering glare from the man.

“Why, you...” Sir Dalton gritted his teeth. “Just as I thought, you’re as impudent as the rest of House Denning.”

I didn’t care. Using the Royal Knight as my errand boy felt good, honestly.

Now then, since Sir Dalton wasn’t around to spy on us, I supposed this was the only opportunity I had to ask this.

“Um, Princess Carina, may I ask you something?”

“You don’t have to be so reserved around me. What is it?”

“Then, I shall take you up on that offer... Princess Carina, why did you come to this school? The Royal Knights said this morning that you were mainly here to interact with students, but that is a lie, is it not?”

She paused for a moment. “Well, well. Why do you think that’s the case?”

“Sir Dalton, Sir Kushner, Sir Delbane...” I listed off the knights attending to her on my fingers. “Professor Loco Moco also mentioned this, but considering the people assigned to you, it is almost as if you are heading off to battle.”

Princess Carina paused. “Indeed, you might be right. Even though they need to be skilled as my guards, those three are knights who especially excel at combat within the Order. Well then, Slowe. What do *you* think we came to this school for?”

“The dungeon. Or, to be more specific, to explore the dungeon, I would assume.”

While I was in Yoram, I’d heard that the princess had gone into a dungeon and suffered a terrible experience once before. More than that, the Flower Knight Oliver had said that the final trial for the Guardian Selection would be held in a dungeon too. It must have been *this* dungeon he’d been referring to.

The princess blinked. “I’m surprised. People in the know would realize it, huh? Yes, that’s right. Interacting with the students is merely an aside. We came to this school to enter the dungeon found near the campus grounds.”

“Ah...” I trailed off. “My apologies, I might have stepped out of line, asking about this.”

“I don’t mind. I know that even if I hadn’t said anything, *you* would’ve arrived at the truth. And we are indebted to you too, so I will tell you the real reason why we’re here.”

The princess of this country took a deep breath, and then she started speaking.

“I am sure that you know the Guardian Selection was suspended because of the incident with Sepith. Originally, we were supposed to return to the capital immediately after it was canceled, but, well... An intriguing report reached our ears. Apparently, a soldier spotted a dragon hatchling in the dungeon.” The princess paused, waiting for my reaction. “Ah, that face... Yes, I agree, that’s impossible. But finding a dragon hatchling is one of Maldini’s dearest wishes.”

“The Cardinal’s?”

“If someone were to tame a dragon hatchling, we might be able to raise it like the Guardian Dragon of Huzak, or so he says. It’s a silly

story, isn't it? But Maldini is serious about this."

The monsters in this world were creatures that originated from dungeons. Even dragons, the kings of the skies and the epitome of flying-type monsters, had also once come from dungeons. However, it was very, very rare for a dragon hatchling to spawn in a dungeon nowadays. If there were confirmed reports of a dragon hatchling, the Adventurers' Guild would've probably been a lot more eager about exploring this dungeon. In the past, there'd only been a handful of confirmed cases where hatchling dragons were successfully tamed. Those dragons, once matured, would obey humans' orders.

"That's why I came. You know dragons tend to take a liking to light mages, right? Like how the Guardian Dragon of Huzak once did."

"The dungeon is currently under the jurisdiction of the army," I said slowly. "Even if the Cardinal wills it, doing such a thing without permission is..."

"I suppose so. But I figured if I came to the school myself, they couldn't do much to stop me, right? Or so I thought, thinking that there was no way they would prohibit me, but it turns out I was wrong. Apparently, if I don't have the duke's permission to enter, they won't permit my entrance, even if it is me making the request, you know? The soldiers are truly loyal to House Denning. It's almost as if the authority of the royal family doesn't mean anything at all."

"Uh, well... Sorry about that."

"It's fine. In exchange, I figured I might as well see to the other business I had in mind." The princess paused. "Hey, Slowe. Why do you think you were chosen as my companion?"

"That's..." I trailed off. "Probably because I am from House Denning if I had to guess. I currently have the highest social standing in this school."

That was why nobody complained about me, even though I had Princess Carina all to myself right now.

"That's wrong." The princess flatly denied that line of reasoning.

"I don't know what the knights said to you this morning, but I chose you as my companion. In fact, I was the one who requested for Maldini to ask for your participation in the Guardian Selection in the first place."

"You did, Princess Carina?"

"Yes, I did. I asked Silva to tell me about House Denning, and at first, it was just to ease my boredom. While he talked about the various things that happened, though, you intrigued me. He was your personal knight once, so..." She trailed off with a shrug.

"Did the guy say anything weird about me?" I asked after a beat of silence.

Silva was currently getting an earful from the Cardinal in Yoram,

apparently. From what I heard, he frequently flouted regulations, and the Cardinal had seized this opportunity to give him a thorough scolding.

Yeah, sounds about right. That guy would be pretty eager to talk about me.

“He talked a lot about you, about how the Prodigy of Wind suddenly transformed one day: neglecting Alicia, your fiancée at the time; playing pranks so severe that they couldn’t be laughed off; polishing off all the winter rations all by yourself... That was around the time that I heard the rumors of you capturing No Face with your own two hands. I thought this was a golden opportunity, and I—”

“Sir Dalton! There you are!” A soldier with a pale face came over and cut her off.

The aforementioned Sir Dalton had just returned after throwing away our empty lunch boxes, and he listened to the soldier’s report. His expression quickly changed.

“Look who’s talking! Who was the one who said that the dungeon was no longer under our jurisdiction? If it has anything to do with the dungeon, leave it to that man.”

“We weren’t able to find Sir Highland, and...”

“Tch, that man is utterly useless.” Sir Dalton spat. “Understood. I will go.” The Royal Knight turned to address us. “Your Highness, there is something I must report.”

Apparently, a powerful monster had crawled out of the dungeon, and the soldiers wanted Sir Dalton to subdue it. Normally, defeating monsters would be Professor Loco Moco’s job since he was experienced at it, but they couldn’t find him. Or so the soldier said.

After receiving permission from Princess Carina, Sir Dalton departed the area with the soldier.

After they left, the princess turned to me and said, “Even if a strong monster came out of the dungeon, the school has nothing to worry about. *You* are here. You were able to stop Sepith’s rampage, Slowe.”

“Not at all. I’m just a pig that knows things on paper but not in practice... Oh.” At that moment, I spotted Charlotte weaving her way through the crowd that had gathered to see the princess. There was a hint of joy in her gait. She was definitely heading off to the training field to practice magic.

“Hey, Slowe. Let’s head to the classroom. I chose to take a lot of the same classes as you.”

“The afternoon classes? Oh... My deepest apologies, Princess Carina. I am actually excused from all my classes this afternoon.”

The class was a lecture-based one that first-years could choose to

take in advance. Since I'd done very well on the end-of-year exams last year—too well, in fact—the teacher had declared that there was nothing more I could learn in that class, and I was exempt from taking all of those classes in the second year.

I gave a rundown of the situation to Princess Carina, and her expression went stiff.

“Now then, please stand up, Your Highness!”

In the place of Sir Dalton, who'd left to deal with the monster, a slender, handsome Royal Knight approached. It was Sir Kushner, whose defining traits were his pleasant, husky voice and the Gemini Swords equipped at his hip. He had a cheerful demeanor, and he had been talking to a couple of girls for a while before he headed our way.

There were all kinds of Royal Knights, apparently.

“I graduated from here, so I know where most of the classrooms are! You don't have to resort to relying on the boy from House Denning. Now, let us head off!”

The Royal Knight's cheerfulness knew no bounds, and he dragged an unwitting Princess Carina along by her hand. It was quite a surreal sight.

I stood up, snorting as I stretched thoroughly. *Now then.* Normally, I would do only one thing when I had free time: work on my weight-loss regimen, of course. I needed to lose as much weight as possible to prepare for my father's arrival.

But exercise was the furthest thing from my mind today. I could only think about Charlotte. Like how the Royal Knights attended to Princess Carina, I had to stick to Charlotte's side too. As her guardian, it was my responsibility to watch over her so that she didn't cause other people trouble with her wand.

The training field was completely barren of trees or buildings. It was a spacious plot of earthen ground made for the sole sake of practicing magic. It was here that I found Charlotte, practicing diligently on top of the dense, slightly elevated earth.

“Hey there, Charlotte!”

“Huh?” She turned to me. “Master Slowe! What are you doing here?”

“I was worried about you causing trouble for other people.”

“Jeez, you're such a meanie! I've never caused trouble for other people!”

“Huh? Really?” I muttered doubtfully. She must've completely forgotten about all the trouble she'd caused me during the speed-eating contest a while back.

“Any! Way!” Charlotte exclaimed as she pulled at my sleeve. She giggled. “Don't have a heart attack when you hear this!” Her voice

bubbled with excitement and exhilaration.

“Did something good happen?”

“It’s about my magic, of course!” Charlotte said, exasperated. “I’ve gotten better at magic!”

I didn’t know how often I’d heard that same phrase come out of her mouth. At this rate, I thought I might end up in another endless tug-of-war with her over her wand. But...

“Take a look at this!” Charlotte said, drawing in a breath in anticipation. She tightened her grip on her wand in one hand and threw a small pebble up into the air with the other.

Huh. It’s unlike her to start immediately with a demonstration. Ah, she’s using a light spell to make something stop in midair, eh? Within light magic, stopping objects in motion was a relatively difficult feat to accomplish, but Charlotte had a tendency to dive right into the deep end with harder spells. I see, I see. But I know what’s gonna happen next. She’s going to fail, right?

“Here I go! *Clock Lock!*”

The small rock froze in the air. One second passed, then two, three... Then the glow around it dissipated, and the rock fell to the ground.



I rubbed my eyes in disbelief. *What? What was that? An illusion? When did Charlotte learn to use a spell as advanced as Illusion?!*

"Master Slowe, did you see that?! I'll do it again!" Charlotte threw the little pebble up into the air and waved her wand as she chanted. And then she did it again, and again, over and over. She didn't succeed every single time, but she wasn't half bad. At least half of her attempts were successful, and those successes were pretty consistent, to boot.

Not only that, but there was one thing completely different compared to her spells before: the light spirits were helping Charlotte. Though she was a princess, the light spirits hadn't been interested in her up to this point, and yet now, the spirits were paying attention to her.

"Th-Th-Th...That's amazing, Charlotte!!!" Though I knew the students around us would be disgusted by me doing this, I seized Charlotte's hand.

"Whoa! Master Slowe!"

"It's a miracle! A miracle, I say," I exclaimed in delight.

"A miracle?! That's a mean thing to say!" Charlotte complained. "Oh, w-whoa!"

I clung onto her hand and jerked it around in excitement. I showered her with every single compliment I could think of. Charlotte's pride dissolved into bashfulness and her eyes flickered between the various appalled gazes of the students around us.

"We've got to celebrate! Let's have a feast today! We could even make this an anniversary! To think that such a day would come... It's your anniversary today, Charlotte! The day a miracle happened!"

"This is embarrassing. Master Slowe, please calm down!" Charlotte pleaded. "Stop it already!"

Flushing crimson, Charlotte shoved me away from her.

"Oiiink!!!"

"Um, anyway, Master Slowe. I saw you with Princess Carina earlier. What's it like being her companion? Is it hard?"

A silence fell over the training field. Even though everyone had been diligently training away at their magic, the moment the topic of Princess Carina came up, they all stopped to listen in.

"I'm not with her all day and night or anything." I shrugged. "Plus, I'm not the one who's having a hard time, it's Princess Carina. Charlotte, you remember what happened to Alicia when she first came to Kirsch, don't you?"

"That was quite the stir. I'm almost amazed that Alicia didn't have a nervous breakdown during all that."

“What the princess is going through is worse than that. Comparing the second princess of Cirquista and the crown princess of Daryth... Though I feel bad towards Alicia for saying this, they are on two completely different levels. On top of that, Princess Carina doesn’t go out in public often, so a lot of students want to become acquainted with her during this rare opportunity.” I paused. “There are swarms of them during breaks between classes. I guess I get where they are coming from, though.”

“Oh wow,” Charlotte said slowly, “that sounds like a hard time.”

If word got out that Charlotte was the lost princess of Huzak, though...the resulting uproar would be tenfold that of the one surrounding Princess Carina. After all, one of Charlotte’s ancestors was famous for being so beautiful that she’d even made a dragon fall for her charms.

“The Royal Knights will probably do something about it.” I decided to change the topic. “So show me that spell again, Charlotte.”

“True, Princess Carina has a lot of strong guards around her. Okay, understood. Here...I go!”

After that, Charlotte continued to practice her spell with me until she’d exhausted her mana. I was captivated the whole time. She’d always dreamt of becoming a proper mage, and I had watched her struggle towards that goal all this time; this was a moving sight. But the clock in the training field marched on mercilessly, and...

“Slowe Denning. You didn’t show up at the appointed hour to meet with the princess... Do you have a death wish?”

I completely forgot about my promise to pick Princess Carina up after classes and earned myself a royal chewing out from the Royal Knights for it.

At that point in time, I still didn’t know a thing. I didn’t know what was going on in the wonderful princess’s head, and I politely left our meeting place to let her deal with the surrounding students on her own.

So far, Princess Carina seemed like the ideal princess. So why didn’t she ever appear in the anime? It took only one single day for me to realize the reason for that.

On the second day of Princess Carina’s stay at Kirsch, the incident happened.

“Hey, has anyone seen Princess Carina today?” one student asked.

“Apparently, nobody has seen her at all!” another replied.

Princess Carina was nowhere to be found.

Students had already doxxed Princess Carina’s course schedule and it quickly became common knowledge. Everyone knew exactly where she’d be and when she’d be there. There must’ve been an

extreme pervert at this school who enjoyed spying on people's privacy.

"The princess overslept! That must be it!"

"Seems like our princess has a playful side. Tell everyone on the team! The princess overslept!"

Jeez, being a princess was a tough gig. Even though it was only her second day here, she already had a group of rabid fans following her every move, one that kept growing as time went on. She was different from me; people celebrated whenever I *wasn't* in class.

But the princess didn't show up to her next class either, nor the one she was supposed to take with me, so I started getting worried about her. Then...

"News hot off the press! Apparently, the Royal Knights are still standing in front of the female dorms! She didn't oversleep! There's a real possibility that she's sick!"

"Shouldn't we go to visit her to give her our best wishes? If we all went as a group, those scary Royal Knights might actually hear us out," Shuya chimed in.

"Are you an idiot, Shuya? Boys are banned from the female dorms. You'd be kicked out immediately."

Rumors about Princess Carina flowed from all directions as I walked down the corridor, and everyone was talking about the princess. *Feeling sick, huh? Well, considering the environment of the palace the princess is usually at...it's way too loud here.*

"The princess isn't coming out because of all these thoughtless people. I'm sure of it," Valjean said.

"Hey, Valjean, be more careful with my lunch. You're spilling the soup," I complained.

"Lord Slowe, have you heard? Apparently, afternoon classes yesterday were just as bad. I heard that during one period, so many people went to gawk at the princess that the professor couldn't teach a thing. Oh, the poor princess..." Valjean sighed. "Oh yeah, Lord Slowe. How about we deliver Princess Carina's lunch to her room? Since you're assigned as her attendant, they might allow you in. I'll accompany you while you're at it."

"Who are you calling an attendant? And boys aren't allowed in the female dorms. It's unlike you to say something that silly, like Shuya would..." I shook my head. *Ugh, even Lord Pauper's all worked up.*

But then Lord Pauper went silent. I raised an eyebrow at him. "What is it? Why are you suddenly so quiet?"

"Master Slowe," Valjean began slowly, "behind you."

"Hm?" I turned around. "Whoa, Sir Dalton. What are you doing

here?"

Behind me, standing stiff as a board, was the Royal Knight with a magnificent, rugged black beard, Sir Dalton. I was so surprised that I nearly fell out of my seat. "Slowe Denning," he barked. "Follow me."

This turned out to be an SOS from the one they called the One-Strike Knight.

"Hey, look at that! Why is the Piggy Duke coming into the female dorms?" one girl exclaimed.

"D-Don't say that. If he sets his sights on you, you'll be in for a world of pain!"

"Hmph. House Denning is nothing. My house is just as scary, and naughty children cower at the mere mention of our name—" The girl cut herself off, switching to a welcoming tone. "Ah, hello, Lord Denning."

I can't hear anything. I don't know anything. I chanted that mantra in my head and emptied my mind. Oink, oink, oink.

Before my eyes was the large back of Sir Dalton. If I weren't with this man, I'd have been immediately kicked out of the girls' garden paradise, and I'd have a new legend following me throughout the rest of my school days: the legend that the Piggy Duke had finally snuck into the female dorms.

"But...he's a lot thinner than he was before."

"Hey, you, go talk to him! This is your chance to marry into riches! Well, I mean, people from House Denning have nothing but battle in their heads, but they say that he's nearly been disowned, so you wouldn't have to head to the battlefield..."

All these gazes digging into me... They hurt. But the comments I heard weren't all insults. Their reaction was a little different from before. Some girls even bowed to me as I passed by them, and I got fewer looks of visible disgust too. Some girls went as far as debating amongst themselves whether to talk to me.

"Charlotte, this reaction is..." I hesitated.

"You are a member of House Denning, so *this* is the norm! Anyway, Master Slowe! Is it okay for someone like me to visit the princess's room?" Charlotte asked.

"What are you saying, Charlotte? We share our fate with each other!"

"But I won't be of any use!" Charlotte protested.

"You're being loud, young lady," Sir Dalton warned.

"I-I'm so sorry!"

The Royal Knight chided the two of us for talking the whole while as we climbed up the stairs one step at a time.

Under the request of the Royal Knights, I followed Sir Dalton

towards the princess's room. She must not have been feeling very well. Maybe they wanted me to use a healing spell on her?

We passed by the door of Alicia's room and finally arrived at the princess's room. The moment we did, Sir Dalton opened the door without hesitation and entered.

"Wait, can we really go in without asking first?" I asked, puzzled.

"It doesn't matter," the knight replied curtly.

"We haven't gotten the princess's permission, though, from the looks of things..."

"It doesn't matter," he repeated after a moment's pause.

It would matter to the princess! It seemed that the scowling knight had no intention of saying anything further on the matter, though.

The layout of the room wasn't too different from mine, but it was a few times larger. A plush carpet lined the floor, and the bay windows let in tons of sunlight. Even the boys who lived in the slums that were the first-floor boys' dorms probably couldn't find it in themselves to be jealous at how extravagant this place was. It was *that* mind-blowing.

"Slowe Denning, you are the only one allowed to proceed any further." The knight dragged me in front of the door leading to the bedroom before turning to Charlotte. "You go stand in the corner of the room and wait for the boy there. It will depend on the princess's mood how long he's in there, but it shouldn't take too long."

Huh? I'm going in alone? No Royal Knights with me either? Hold up a hot second, nobody told me about this.

"Slowe Denning. You must keep everything you see in the room to yourself. If you even attempt to speak of what you saw—"

"Ugh, fine! I know that! You Royal Knights are such a troublesome bunch!" I said, exasperated.

The self-centered Royal Knight opened the door to the princess's bedroom. "I wish you the best of luck," the knight said. He forcefully shoved me into Princess Carina's bedroom without knocking, and by the looks of it, he definitely didn't have her permission either.

A pleasant smell hung in the air. This was an entirely different world. This was a paradise on earth known as Princess Carina's bedroom.

But instead of finding the rumored-to-be-ill princess...

Someone was humming cheerfully.

I witnessed a girl in light pink pajamas sprawled out on the bed. Her face was the picture of laziness, and her bedhead was sticking out all over the place. It looked like she was snacking on something.

Oh. My instincts told me that I must not witness this, the

princess's true form. Immediately, I did a right-about-face. But...

"Ow!!!" That Royal Knight had closed the door without making a sound, and I ran face-first into it, smacking my forehead hard!

"Wh-Who's there?!"

"Ow, ow, ow... Princess Carina, it is me."

"Huh...?"

There was a stretch of silence. I looked into the princess's eyes as she lay on the bed clutching a cookie in one hand, and she looked into mine in turn.

"Huuuh?!?!?!" The cookie was crushed in her hand. She swished her head up, and her rose-gold bangs waved in the air. And then, Princess Carina covered her head with the bedsheets, and she hollered, "Dalton! Why did you let Slowe into my room without permission?!"

But there was no response.

"Jeez! Dalton, you're the worst!" she yelled.

Sir Dalton was supposed to be still waiting outside the bedroom, but it seemed that he was purposefully ignoring the princess.

"Um... Princess Carina?"

There was a pause. "That's...not my name."

"Uh, even if you say that..." I trailed off.

I still couldn't comprehend what I was seeing. Was this *really* Princess Carina? She reminded me of a sulking child, hiding under the bedsheets like that. She didn't seem at all like the same person who had politely answered the students yesterday.

There was another long stretch of silence before she spoke up. "Leave."

"Uh... Um... Everyone is waiting for you. There are a lot of people worried about you, Your Highness, thinking that you might not be feeling well."

But I could hear only indistinguishable mumbles and groans coming out from the bundle of sheets. Princess Carina didn't seem like she planned on leaving her shelter any time soon, and judging by her cheery mood earlier, she probably wasn't sick.

Still, I persisted, trying to talk to the girl who made a protruding lump on the bed. But I got no reply. *So this is what people mean when they say that someone wouldn't give them the time of day.* I put my palm against my forehead and looked helplessly towards the white ceiling.

Still, I had no idea how or why Princess Carina had turned into...*this*.

Oh. Now that I thought about it, people did call Princess Carina a hermit.

The beautiful princess poked her head out of her sheets at long last, looking very much like that hermit she was rumored to be.

“Slowe, this is all your father’s fault.”

“What do you mean, if I may ask?”

She glanced around the bedroom nervously, making sure that there was no one else in the room before she started explaining bit by bit.

“Maldini contacted me and told me that Duke Denning gave us permission to explore the dungeon. However, there’s quite some time before we’re allowed to go in... Which means that I have to stay at school for a while... How many more days do I have to put on a smile like a princess...and wave around my hand?!”

“Um, what in the world...?”

“Ugh, don’t you get it?! Yesterday was all an act! All of it! It was just me trying my best to act like a proper princess! Okay?!” Almost as if she were taking her anger out on me, she lobbed a pillow in my direction.

“I am not leaving this room, Slowe. *Not ever!!!* I acted like a prim and proper princess! I tried my best, so I deserve to have a break! Not only that, but all the boys here always look at my chest and my waist! If today goes the same as yesterday... No! I refuse!!!”

“W-Whoa! Violence is bad!” I protested. “Wait, huh?! Why is there broken glass on the floor?!”

When I first came in, I’d thought the room was messy, but I hadn’t gotten a good look. Now that I *had*, I saw that the floor was a mess, littered with the broken remnants of all kinds of things: the curtains, the window panes, the clock, some textbooks... It was as if a hurricane had swept through and wrecked the place.

“I will resist to the bitter end until you get out of here! Out with you!”

Hey, who called this girl modest and refined?! She isn’t like that at all! Ah. That’s why Sir Dalton looked utterly exhausted. No, wait! Did that damned beardo leave me to persuade Princess Carina all on my own?! It’s impossible! I’m not a counselor for shut-ins!

Since everyone knew I was her attendant, bad rumors might’ve started about me if the princess had kept holing up in her room. *I need to get her out of here somehow.*

I waited until Princess Carina calmed down before I spoke to her again. I told her positive things about going outside, like how the food in the dining hall was nice, and how the air around here was fresh.

“Princess Carina, uh... School is fun, you know?”

“What’s fun about it? I had a terrible time yesterday.”

“Ummm... You... You can have fun with f-friends?”

I didn’t even agree with what I was saying, to be honest. School being *fun*? What was I *talking* about? School was just a safe haven I’d

taken refuge in after I ran away from House Denning, and it was a place where I could live happily with Charlotte. Nothing more.

And friends? *I'll be honest. I have very few of them.* Even during break times, there was only silence around me. But I ranted about all the fun things about school I could think of to try to persuade the princess to leave her room.

Despite my best efforts...the result was a complete failure.

"Oink..." I muttered sadly. Feeling utterly pathetic, I slunk down the stairs. All the while, everyone in the female dorms looked at me with judgmental eyes since boys were not allowed in on principle. Those stares made me feel even worse. "Oink... Oink, oink, oink."

"Oooh... I see, I see." Charlotte nodded.

Like I thought, it's impossible for someone like me to persuade a hermit to come out. I hunched over my slightly chubby body, shrinking into myself. Charlotte walked next to me as I explained the gist of what had happened between the princess and me while leaving a lot of the details unsaid. Basically, I told her that the princess had detested the frenzy yesterday and wanted to avoid it at all costs, so she might not come out of her room anymore.

"But you tried your best to persuade her, right? Then everything will be all right."

"All right?" I muttered, puzzled. In the end, I'd failed to persuade her to leave. That's how I saw it, but Charlotte didn't seem to have the same opinion.

"I don't really know why the princess decided to shut herself in her room, but I'm sure she will come out eventually," Charlotte declared confidently.

I was taken aback by how sure she sounded. "What makes you say that?"

"After all, Master Slowe...you were the one who got me to go outside!" she said, her smile brimming with confidence as always.

Loud, staccato thuds echoed out into the air. Was this an orc marching onto campus? No. It was the sound of my footsteps. It was the sound of me darting around campus first thing in the morning at an incredible speed. My jogs up to this point couldn't even begin to compare!

"Th-That's amazing, Master Slowe! You've broken your record too! Even orcs can't run that fast! With this, nobody will call you a human orc!" Charlotte exclaimed.

"I'll head over really quick and cut across the training field! Nobody should be around right now! Oiiiink!" I was sick and tired of my normal running course! By springing through that uneven ground

at the training field, I could improve my sense of balance!

“Oh no! Master Slowe, in front! Look out!”

“Huh?” A certain black cat was crossing the road ahead of me.
“What the... Aaah!”

It seemed like the Great Spirit of Wind had been enjoying a morning stroll. *But hey, don't stop there! Get out of the way with that nimble body of yours!* But the cat stopped right where it was and stared at me with a look that seemed to say that it wouldn't move an inch.

At this rate, I would kick the Great Spirit away! Though the Great Spirit could easily blow me away with a single spell, they were pretending to be a normal pet in front of Charlotte. Even now, they were pretending to be a normal, surprised cat!

“O-Oiiink!!!!!!!!!!!!!!”

This is bad! I'm going to step on them! If I piss them off, I don't know what kind of pain lies in wait, and that would be a pain in the neck. So... To avoid the Great Spirit, I slid on the ground, and...

“Ow...” I winced. Seriously, why were they *here*, of all places? They were probably here to check on Charlotte, but there was no reason for them to be in the middle of the path! My hand moved automatically to my wand, but I quickly decided against using it.

“Master Slowe, aren't you going to heal the wound on your foot?”

“As self-punishment for being careless and neglecting to watch where I was going, I'll leave it as it is for a while.”

“Amazing! You're so admirable! You've become such a respectable person!”

Hmph, that's only natural. I'm a goody-two-shoes. My reputation around school has improved tremendously lately! Hey, wait a minute!!! Where did that demon cat go?! I was about to complain to the Great Spirit of Wind, but the culprit behind this whole mess disappeared. Damn that spirit!

“I've got a morning present for such a remarkable student! Okay, here you go!” Charlotte held out something to me.

“Present? Oh. That.”

Charlotte handed me the weight-loss potion she'd made. More than half of its contents were depleted, and the earthworm poked its head out of the liquid. *Hi.* Perhaps it understood that the day of its release was near, and it squirmed around energetically in the bottle. It'd been doing that a lot lately.

“Charlotte, where's the juice?” I asked after a pause.

As the liquid decreased in the bottle, the potion itself gradually became more concentrated, and its taste worsened accordingly. It was like drinking sewage water. Lately, even just a small amount was enough to make my head hurt and my tears flow, and leave me nauseous the rest of the day.

It was so bad that I'd begun to fear for my own safety, so I'd thought of a way to drink it that would lessen the side effects. At last, I'd finally found a solution: I would dilute the potion in a large amount of sweet juice. It was simple and effective.

"Here it is," she said, taking the potion back from me to add the juice. "Is this enough?"

"Ah, just a little more... Charlotte, put in a little more!"

"Oh, don't be such a whiny child. Here! Take it!" Charlotte handed the diluted weight-loss potion back to me. I closed my eyes so I didn't have to look at it, and I frowned hard. There wasn't any reason for it; I was just putting on the act of someone deep in thought while I braced myself.

"Master Slowe!" Perhaps Charlotte noticed my silent protest, and she called me out on it with a gasp of realization.

I wasn't making such a face because I didn't want to drink the potion. *It's just that...the taste is...*

"M-Master Slowe, Princess Carina is...!"

"That's right. I'm impressed that you were able to guess that Princess Carina was on my mind, Charlotte."

Indeed, I had been thinking about the princess who'd turned into a mere hermit. It was only the third day after I had been assigned to be her attendant. My mission had changed from taking care of her to bringing her out of that room somehow.

Still, how do you get someone to stop being a hermit? Do I lure her out with good food? With money? Or rare and pretty rocks? Bah, no. The only people that would take those baits would be me, Lord Pauper, or Shuya.

"Master Slowe. Master Slowe!"

I groaned, thinking hard. "I'm a little busy right now, so..." Charlotte had begun to shake my shoulder hard, causing me to rock back and forth. "Fine! I get it, Charlotte, so don't shake me so hard! I'll drink it!"

"No, not that! Over there! Look! That's Princess Carina! Over there!"

No way. Princess Carina had been very stubborn about not going outside. There was no way she would come out after just one day.

Like Charlotte said...there she was.

It was early in the morning when most of the students were still sound asleep. Though she didn't have her guards with her, it was none other than the princess herself; she skulked about suspiciously, her head swiveling back and forth at her surroundings.

She scrutinized the individual branches of tall trees, seemingly looking for something. *Wait. Did Princess Carina come here to look for the small talking bird in the legend I told her yesterday?* Charlotte and I stood, stupefied, observing the princess's every move silently. After a

while, she finally realized we were there.

“Slowe, what are you doing here so early in the morning?! And, uh, this is not what it looks like! Um, I slept so much that I woke up early, that’s all! I didn’t come here to try and catch the talking bird, nuh-uh!”

Princess Carina fired off excuses one after the other until she ran out of breath. That she’d suddenly wanted to breathe some fresh air, or that she had nothing to do and was bored. Though she didn’t really get to the point, basically, she tried to convince us that she wouldn’t believe a silly children’s story, and that she *certainly* didn’t believe that a bird no larger than her hand could talk like a human.

“Well, as long as you get my point...” the princess muttered before looking at Charlotte. “Hey, what’s that in her hand?”

“Oh, that thing is, uh...it’s my weight-loss potion,” I said, and I felt tears forming in the corners of my eyes at the admission.

“Am I imagining things, or is that an earthworm floating inside?”

Looking at the undiluted weight-loss potion in Charlotte’s hands, the princess was very taken aback. Thinking about it logically now, I had to have been missing a few screws when I drank that liquid straight. Even if Charlotte had made it for me, that was still an earthworm’s...fluid.

“This is, um, well. Princess Carina, this is a weight-loss potion I brewed personally! I bought the monster inside it from Hawk Claw Company, and— Ah, my name is Charlotte, and I am Master Slowe’s retainer!”

Charlotte’s every move was exaggerated as she explained, and she bowed her head repeatedly as she spoke. The princess, on the other hand, only stared at Charlotte, speechless.

“That’s how Master Slowe was able to lose weight so quickly! Right, Master Slowe?!”

“Y-Yeah, I get it, but... Are you serious? Slowe, this is your fault too. That shady company obviously scammed your retainer, and she’s still convinced that it’s legit. You shouldn’t lie to her and say that it was effective.” The princess ignored my painstaking consideration for Charlotte and bluntly laid out her opinion.

“H-Heeey! Princess Carina, come over here for a sec!” I led the princess by her hand and moved behind a tree.

On the first day of her stay at Kirsch, Princess Carina had whispered questions to me about anything she didn’t know during class, but I’d immediately realized that she was quite knowledgeable. The princess received special education in the capital, so she must’ve realized right away that the potion didn’t have any of the effects Charlotte claimed it had.

Hurriedly, I explained the situation to the princess. “Charlotte

thinks that potion is the real deal, so please refrain from saying things like that!"

"What? Really? She really thinks that thing is a weight-loss potion? Does she see everything through rose-colored lenses or something? Even though I don't know that much about society, even I know that much."

"The rose-colored lenses are fine! That's part of her charm!" Charlotte didn't know how to be suspicious of people at all, so she'd probably had no idea that she was being deceived. But...that was fine! I wanted Charlotte to keep her pure and trusting heart!

"It's pretty awful of you when you put it that way, you know," the princess said at length.

"I know that! And I know it's completely ineffective, but Charlotte believes in it with all her heart!" In general, I didn't object to what Charlotte did. Even if she did something that seemed off to a bystander, I tended to keep my silence on the matter.

"Ah... Slowe, behind you."

"Huh? O-Oh!" I turned back and found my retainer sulking from behind a couple of trees. I'd been so busy explaining to the princess that I'd completely missed Charlotte sneaking up and listening in on us.

"Uh, Charlotte, please don't get the wrong idea," I pleaded.

"Master Slowe, I am not being deceived! And I don't look at the world through rose-colored lenses!" Charlotte exclaimed.

"Charlotte, that's not it! I don't think that at all!"

"Hawk Claw Company isn't a scam either! And my weight-loss potion is definitely effective!!!" Charlotte exclaimed. Her voice echoed out over the morning campus; as it faded, so too did she.

After I could no longer hear her footsteps, silence fell over us save only for the quiet chirping of the birds. Princess Carina stood still, only moving her eyes around to look for the birds, and when her eyes met mine, she flushed a little.

"Slowe..." the princess trailed off. "Sorry. I shouldn't have said anything."

"No... It's fine. In truth, I didn't want to drink it, so..."

"But I would hate it if this strained your relationship with your retainer."

"It's all right. Charlotte only left because she is heading off to help out in the dining hall after this."

"Helping out? Well, well, even the retainers of House Denning have money troubles..." The princess thought for a moment. "Oh, in that case, I have a great idea, Slowe. Why don't you invite your retainer to tag along, and you two join me on a trip down into the

dungeon? She might be happy about that. The dungeon is a great place to earn money.”

“We students are banned from going down into the dungeon until my father arrives, so that will be impossible.”

In reaction to my words, the princess placed her index finger on my forehead, smiling at me. “Slowe, I am the princess of Daryth, remember?”

Chapter 2: Dungeons and Monsters

“Phew... It’s fiinally over. Professor Matteau’s class is super tough. It’s painful for someone who just pulled an all-nighter,” Shuya complained.

“What’re you saying, Shuya? You’re always sleeping in class, regardless of whether you stayed up the night before.”

The short break time between classes was a torturous time for me. If Valjean wasn’t with me, I had nothing to do. I either stayed in my seat, looking at my textbook out of boredom, or I stared blankly at the noisy people.

But it was different lately. Whenever I was bored, I could just look out the window. Not only was there a large crowd of people I couldn’t name moving around campus...

“Now then, Shuya, shall we get going?”

“Yeah!” he replied enthusiastically.

The flow of people following behind the girl was like a royal procession. Though Princess Carina had a similar shade of blonde hair as Valjean, her charisma was on an entirely different level compared to him.

On top of that, fully armed Royal Knights remained by the princess’s side. I suppose I should’ve expected nothing less from the knights who had been assigned to protect the princess while she was in the dungeon; they were dignified, and each one of them had earned some measure of fame. Only a few days had passed since they had arrived, but the knights themselves had gained a following too.

The knights probably knew how the princess felt about all this, but they didn’t move an inch to save the princess from the students that swarmed around her. They probably were under orders from the Cardinal to encourage the princess to interact with the students or something.

Well, the princess seemed to be causing the knights a lot of trouble, so they probably hoped the princess would interact more with everyone else, even if that meant she’d be getting some abrupt exposure therapy. If I had to guess, though, the princess was probably full of objections in her heart.

“Please shake my hand!”

“Your Highness! Please look this way! Please let me predict your future with my divination!” someone shouted.

Divination? Wow, that guy sure had some guts, offering that to a princess. What would he do if the results turned out negative? *Wait. That's Shuya.* He'd been in the same classroom as me just moments ago... He really couldn't even stay still for a minute, could he? Not only that, but that guy was desperate for even a sliver of the princess's attention, even though he was fated to get together with Alicia in the future.

Hm? Princess Carina had stopped walking. It's a wild thought, but did she react to Shuya's voice? Is she really going to let him perform his crazy divination on her? For a moment I thought she might, but in actuality, she was looking up in my direction. It seemed that the princess had noticed my gaze on her as I watched over her from my spot in the school building.

Why was she glaring at me, though?

"Now then, those breas—" Shuya coughed. "I mean, Princess Carina, please take my hand!"

"Hey, you! Just where exactly are you looking at while you're talking to the princess?!" Sir Dalton snapped.

Ah, I see. That's how it is. When I'd persuaded the princess to come out, I'd made references to Shuya's school life in the anime and told her about the fun things he'd experienced.

I certainly had told her that she might be able to experience the epitome of youth if she attended classes, but...if life were made of roses and rainbows like that, I wouldn't have been suffering so much either.

"Huh?! O-Oh! Sir Dalton! I didn't mean that! Uh, you have the wrong idea! I really didn't, um... Eeeep! Please forgive me! It was just a spur of the moment thing!" Shuya cried.

When someone tiptoed along the border of sexual harassment, though, the Royal Knights would definitely not let it go unnoticed.

I silently sent my best wishes to the princess and retreated into the classroom, almost as if I were fleeing from her gaze. Then, I took out the monster encyclopedia I'd brought with me to keep me occupied during break time and flipped through its pages.

"Exploring the dungeon, huh?" I muttered under my breath. "I honestly didn't think Charlotte would be so eager about going there."

Since she was a clumsy mage, finding some measure of magical success with that spell had given Charlotte a huge boost to her self-confidence.

Later that evening, we sat side by side on a wooden bench near the path. I was studying in preparation for the trip down into the dungeon; next to me, Charlotte peered over my shoulder with intense concentration.

“Wow! There’s sooo many monsters in this book! Also, you’re turning the pages too quickly, Master Slowe! I only just started on that page!” Charlotte complained.

“Huh? Does it take that much time? It’s mostly just illustrations on this page, though,” I said.

There was an ongoing issue, though, one that was distracting me. We were too close to each other, and it’d been bothering me for a while. Charlotte’s snow-white arm kept bumping into my arm as I held the book.

“Please look here! See? Slimes that have taken in poison have nearly identical shapes, so it’s hard to tell them apart. That’s why we need to take the time to read this properly! If we accidentally stepped on one, it could be a disaster!”

The bulky encyclopedia described many of the monsters one would find inside a dungeon, complete with illustrations. Charlotte was absorbed in the page on slimes, the sentient water monsters. There were a lot of cute slime illustrations on the page.

“As long as you don’t get close to slimes, they’re not a problem. They’re slowpokes.”

“I’m not as knowledgeable as you about monsters, so I need to study properly! Hmm, I see.” Charlotte nodded to herself. “Okay, next page, please.”

“The lizardmen are definitely the coolest!” Another student’s voice rang out nearby. Around us, other people were also absorbed in their own monster encyclopedias, just like we were.

They were probably all going to join the dungeon expedition the army was organizing. Currently, studying about monsters in the dungeon was the latest under-the-table trend at Kirsch.

“No way. I’d vote for the unicorns. Look at the gorgeous mane on this one. Lizardmen can’t replicate this same kind of color and luster. Besides, the unicorns only allow pure maidens on their backs. If I became the headmaster, I’d definitely make unicorn equestrian classes compulsory! And I’d ban all illicit sexual relationships in the school!”

“Ah, look, Master Slowe! There are all kinds of orcs over here!” Charlotte exclaimed, and I refocused my attention on her.

This particular encyclopedia was a custom-order edition manufactured by the Adventurers’ Guild, and it was especially detailed, categorizing the monsters by their characteristics.

“Isn’t this the Baron Orc that snuck onto campus a while back?!” Charlotte exclaimed, looking at a chibi illustration of the Baron Orc. “The real deal was so dignified, and yet, as an illustration, it’s cute...”

“Y-You think so?” I had no idea why Charlotte would describe the Baron Orc as cute or dignified. I mean, the only difference between a Baron Orc and a normal orc was a magnificent beard, that was all. But

something about it tingled Charlotte's cute senses, apparently. Well, considering the fact that Charlotte had that scary Great Spirit of Wind as her pet, I shouldn't have been surprised.

"Master Slowe, just wondering. Your encyclopedia seems to be more amazing than the ones other people have."

"I specially ordered one that real adventurers use; that's why. Anyway, Charlotte. Are you serious about joining Princess Carina and her knights to go exploring the dungeon? You used to *hate* monsters, you know. I remember clearly. All it took was me mimicking an orc and snorting to make you cry."

Indirectly, I probed for her reaction. Charlotte's homeland, Huzak, was now ruled by the monsters migrating from the north that had destroyed it.

Allied troops of Daryth and Cirquista, as well as other countries of the Great Four, had planned many operations to take back Huzak from the monsters. However, the sheer number of monsters there was overwhelming, and those operations had yet to see the light of day.

Even now, people like the current queen's Guardian Knight, Sir Delfrey, firmly insisted that we should reclaim Huzak. But the fact of the matter was, that land had become a terrifying place, and we couldn't deal with it.

"That was a very, veeery long time ago, and I'm no longer scared of the likes of monsters! Master Slowe, please flip to the next page!"

Her words were very brave...but...!

"Oh... Master Slowe, you have that look on your face, the one you get whenever you think that I'm just saying empty words!"

"Oink?! Th-That's not what I'm thinking at all! Honest!" Though I felt bad for thinking that, Charlotte had hit the nail right on the head.

"But that's fine! Even if I can't help much while we explore, we might be able to make it quite deep into the dungeon with the Royal Knights around. Plus, I hear that people can earn lots of money in the dungeon. Hey, if we find super rare loot in the dungeon, let's sell it to make some quick cash and add that to our allowance!"

"Hmm... That's an excellent idea, oink."

"Master Slowe! Watch what you're saying!"

"Oh, oops." I paused, minding my words so that I didn't oink again. "Well, that is an excellent idea...so let's do that!"

"Yay!!!"

Her words were encouraging, and when I was with her, I couldn't help but cheer too.

That wasn't all. Whenever I saw Charlotte's elated face... How should I put it? Her happiness was contagious, and that happiness filled me to the brim. Charlotte had been drowning in sadness when I first met her, and she'd been a completely different person from the

girl before me now. Just being by her side made me happy. It was a little embarrassing to think this, but it was the truth, so it couldn't be helped.

Oh, yes. So this was what they meant when people bragged about the people they love. There were a lot of reasons why I liked her, but if I had to choose the top reason...I suppose it would have been how earnest she was and how she faced everything with all she had. It wasn't something visible; you could only feel it when you were near her.

"Ah, are you also reading a monster encyclopedia, Lord Denning?! Whoa! That's the one real adventurers use, isn't it?! It's super expensive!" Somebody was talking in the background excitedly. "Um, I...I want to become someone strong like you! So I will try my best in the upcoming dungeon expedition!"

I didn't reply, assuming they were talking to someone else.

"Master Slowe! He's talking to you, Master Slowe!" Charlotte prodded me.

"Huh?" I was shocked. There was a noble student with slightly curly brown hair there. "Oh, me? I-I see. Just do your best."

"I will! See you again!" The unnamed student darted off with sparkles in his eyes.

"Ah, hey!" I hastily called out to him. "You, over there! Wait!"

"Huh?"

"Exploring dungeons is something dangerous, and your life's constantly on the line in there. If you sense that something is out of your depth, even just a little bit, retreat immediately!" I yelled.

"Y-Yes! Understood!"

It was surely all thanks to the girl next to me that students had started talking to me like this. I didn't want to lose her like I would in the anime, and that was why I'd chosen to take everything back into my own hands.

Rays of the evening sun shone down onto the school campus. Before I knew it, the encyclopedia I'd been holding ended up in Charlotte's hands.

"Have you heard that rumor? Apparently, the princess is going to explore the dungeon before us, and with those Royal Knights at that!" I couldn't help but overhear some students gossiping around me.

"You think they'll be looking for loot? But someone as influential as the princess could probably get anything she wanted if she asked for it..."

The dungeon was a world of monsters that had been created by a certain ore named the dungeon core. When asked about whether she

wanted to join a party to explore the dungeon, Charlotte had agreed immediately. She'd done the same thing back when she'd said she wanted to go to the theater in Yoram. It seemed that Charlotte was working towards realizing her ideal self.

The plan was that the Royal Knights would split off to search the dungeon for the hatchling dragon, apparently. A dragon hatchling was a valuable, special monster. If one were sent off to the market, it would fetch a hundred gold coins... No, at least three hundred gold coins. As far as I could tell, it was the Cardinal's dearest wish to find one, but surprisingly, Princess Carina seemed pretty eager to find it too.

Professor Loco Moco, on the other hand, had objected to the princess and her knights going into the dungeon up until the very last minute. I sort of got why. If the Royal Knights went wild in the dungeon, in response, the dungeon would temporarily spawn many monsters to protect itself accordingly. That had to be why he'd protested so much.

Charlotte stared intently down at the page we'd turned to.

"What's wrong, Charlotte? Did one of the monsters catch your eye?"

"Ah, no, um..."

The page in question featured a dragon, the king of the skies. The entry spanned several pages; the famous anecdotes that lined the pages had piqued her interest.

I peered over. "That's—" Depicted on the page was a woman standing in a grassy field leaning into an enormous black dragon. When I squinted to get a better look, I noticed a small black cat near the woman's foot.

"If I remember right, that's..." I trailed off.

Among all the stories I'd heard about the intelligent dragons, one of the most famous was the legend of the Guardian Dragon of Huzak.

Long before Huzak had been destroyed, monsters from the north would occasionally try to invade the country. The monsters in the north fought with Dustour over territory day and night, every single day.

The monsters had decided that Huzak was an easier target than the Country of Knights and the Metropolis of Water. Huzak's people led simple lives, working away diligently in the agricultural industry; if powerful monsters from the north invaded, they would fall immediately. And thus the central nation fell under the monsters' attention. Little did they know that Huzak had a powerful protector.

"That's...Sekhmet, the Guardian Dragon of Huzak," I finished.

Whenever Huzak was under attack by monsters, this black dragon

would appear out of nowhere. Over time, it became known as the Guardian Dragon of Huzak, and it was worshipped with a reverence akin to the land's guardian deity. But that protection came at a price; in exchange for decimating the monsters, the Guardian Dragon snatched away each generation's princesses.

Though Huzak had been a target of monsters, its savior had also been a monster, and so it'd had a twisted relationship with them. Its people had continued to strengthen their own military power while under the dragon's protection so that they could defend themselves one day without needing to rely on it.

If the Cardinal got his hands on a dragon hatchling, he'd likely aim to rear it into a Guardian Dragon that would protect our country without any payment in return.

"Master Slowe...do you think that the Guardian Dragon really existed?" Charlotte asked.

"Yeah, I think it did exist," I said. "Dragons are prideful beings, and because of that, they keep their promises. Once upon a time, Princess Lily wished for the destruction of the monsters that had attacked her country, and she gave up her own future in exchange. The black dragon kept that promise; it was probably still bound to that oath even after she died."

"I know that the dragon was infatuated with her, but would it really continue to protect the country after the person it loved had died? And would a monster really protect the country? I'm just wondering because...if it really did exist, then...back then—"

"Charlotte, dragons may have a long lifespan, but Sekhmet last appeared over a hundred years ago," I reminded her.

"Ah, that's right." Charlotte snapped out of it. "What in the world am I saying?"

Charlotte remained deep in thought for a long while after that, a tormented look twisting her features. Up until now, she had avoided mentioning Huzak, cutting off the conversation just like this. To my recollection, she'd never started a conversation with me about her home country.

Sekhmet and Huzak... Charlotte's ancestor had offered her own existence to the dragon and protected her country. But Huzak had been destroyed by monsters nearly a decade ago. Everyone in Huzak had probably hoped the Guardian Dragon would appear to save them, but in the end, it never did. *I suppose even a monster that strong can't win against its own lifespan, huh?*

"Do you want to keep that, Charlotte? You can have it." I gestured to the book.

"It looks really expensive, though. Is it really okay for me to have

it?"

"I already finished reading it anyway. I should be getting a new one sometime soon too."

"Wow!" Charlotte looked elated. "Thank you very much, Master Slowe! I will treasure it!"

Knowing her past, I honestly could never have imagined that Charlotte would be happy to receive a book about monsters. This was the girl who, back in the day, would cower in fear from a single glance at art that depicted them.

"I'll head off to help out in the dining hall, then! By the way, the dessert today is really extravagant, Master Slowe, so please look forward to it!" Charlotte said, and she left, clutching the encyclopedia to her chest.

Hmm. Is she really okay? Charlotte said she's not a kid anymore, but when it comes to monsters... I feel that she'd have a harder time facing them than those bandits at the theater. After all, her homeland was destroyed by monsters. She must've faced some awful things during her journey from Huzak to my family's lands. She had nightmares every single night when we first met. I contemplated in silence by myself.

Before I knew it, somebody stood in front of me. "Hey," she called out to me. She was backlit by the sun, and I was blinded by the light. I still realized who it was, though, both her and the person standing next to her.

Shuya hesitated before he spoke up. "Do you need to talk to Denning or something?"

"Shuya, you can go on ahead," Alicia said.

"You've been acting a little different ever since you came back from Yoram, Alicia." Shuya shrugged. "Well, all's fine by me, I suppose."

It was Alicia, and the boy with flaming-red hair next to her was Shuya; together, they were the protagonist and his heroine. Shuya was the world's savior who fought the empire in the anime, and he was currently looking at Alicia with a quizzical look. But, in the next moment...

"Ah, right, Denning," Shuya said. "There's something I wanted your help with."

On instinct, my guard went up. In the anime, we'd always been at odds with each other, and right now was no different. Ever since I enrolled in this school, we'd been at each other's throats.

I'd already forgotten what started it all. But he used to get on my nerves in the past, no matter what he did. So I'd mess with him, and we'd end up fighting every day. *No, I don't have to remember all the details.* I stopped that train of thought.

Most of the time, it had been my fault that we ended up arguing.

Had I not antagonized him, we probably could've been civil with each other. Still, I had no plans of making nice with him after all that...

"I'm going to participate in the dungeon expedition event the army is holding soon. I wanted your help with that, actually... Well, I want to get into the dungeon before anyone else! Would you be able to use your influence to do something about that? You're from House Denning, right? So, well... You know what I mean!" He gestured vaguely.

"Huh?" I let out an incredulous noise. "Uh, I'm pretty sure that'd be impossible..."

"Oh, pretty please! Can't you do something about it? I really want to join the army after I graduate! These are some unsettling times, you know? Someone dangerous snuck into the school, then a dungeon appeared near here... I want to join the army so that I can protect this country! That's why I want to play an active role in the dungeon. I want your father to remember me! Please, Denning, *please!*"

"O-Okay...I get it," I said, taken aback.

"Yahoo! Awesome! Thanks a bunch!" Shuya cheered. "I'll go on ahead then, Alicia! Don't fight with Denning anymore, okay? Oh, and something definitely happened between the two of you in Yoram, right?!"

"Jeez, Shuya! Just go already!" Alicia groaned.

The exchange showed just how close of friends the two of them were. They didn't seem like they were romantically interested in each other at all, not like they were in the anime. Alicia was using Shuya as an errand boy because of his debt to her and only saw him as a convenient servant.

I shook that thought away. *Nah. I have nothing to do with their relationship.*

Shuya laughed heartily. "Don't get so angry, Alicia! See ya!"

Shuya was a more important topic right now. The guy had talked to me without any reservations, as if nothing had happened between us up to this point. Was I the only one out of us two that was really wary of the other? *He's... Ugh, it's like I made a fuss for nothing.*

After a pause, I spoke up, turning to Alicia. "Are you really fine with him leaving like that?"

"I'm fine!" she exclaimed. "More importantly, Piggy Slowe, you seem to be doing a pretty good job at babysitting the Little Daryth. I have to be honest, I was very surprised." Alicia sat down on the bench, in the same spot Charlotte had sat just a few moments ago.

"Surprised?" I asked, puzzled. "Why?"

"I thought you'd give up on the first day. I'm surprised that the princess would come out to attend classes."

“Wait...” I trailed off. “*You* know about Princess Carina’s...that?”

“The Little Daryth always found some reason to excuse herself from royal events, so...” Alicia shrugged. “Well, the princess is special, so nobody would deny her that. So I thought she’d only try hard on the first day, then find some excuse or other to hole herself up somewhere like she has in the past. And yet, she didn’t. What kind of special technique did you use?”

“I didn’t really do anything. Anyway, I get it. So you wanted to talk to me about Princess Carina, then?”

“I heard rumors that you were going down into the dungeon with the Little Daryth.” Alicia paused. “Is that true?”

“You heard the news pretty quickly, huh?” I said hesitantly.

A large group of students talking about the dungeon passed us by as we were talking.

“Don’t use a sword! Use a knife!” one argued.

“No, I’m taking a sword! A trip to the dungeon is like going to the playground for me.”

The students were all fired up about the expedition; Alicia watched them with a chilly expression.

“They’re just repeating the word ‘dungeon’ like mindless parrots,” she muttered coldly. “And to think that the army refused to let the Adventurers’ Guild take care of the dungeon. They just left it sitting there in the forest...” Alicia shook her head. “I can’t imagine what the duke is thinking.”

Every country dealt with dungeons in their own unique ways, either by leaving it under the jurisdiction of the Adventurers’ Guild the moment it was discovered or by sending in soldiers to destroy it.

In Daryth, the latter was more common. Handing over the dungeon to the Adventurers’ Guild would mean a lot of tax revenue, but in my opinion, the risks taken weren’t worth the coin. It was better to let the soldiers take care of it.

“I understand your worry since there’s that Great Dungeon in Cirquista, but...”

“Listen here, I’m saying this for the sake of this school!” Alicia snapped. “What are they going to do if the worst-case scenario happens? What if some monster from outside the dungeon sneaks in and steals the dungeon core?”

“Well, there are all those soldiers standing guard at the entrance to make sure that random monsters don’t make it inside,” I reasoned.

“I am saying that such measures are subpar. The Adventurers’ Guild would be thorough and eliminate all monsters in the vicinity, for example.”

The dungeon core enshrined in the deepest, darkest depths of the dungeon constantly spawned monsters. The dungeon’s survival was

dependent on it, and because of that, the core was valuable to both humans and monsters alike. Where adventurers explored the dungeon in search of riches, monsters aimed to control dungeons that spawned. If a human obtained the dungeon core, the dungeon would be completely destroyed; if a *monster* obtained the dungeon core, it would gain everything in the dungeon.

But clearing a dungeon was not an easy feat, even for monsters. The dungeon-spawned monsters risked life and limb to eliminate infiltrating foreign monsters.

“What are they going to do if an outside monster obtains the dungeon core and causes a horde invasion? If something like that happened here... Just the thought of it sends shivers down my spine.”

“A horde invasion? You’re making mountains out of molehills here,” I said.

When an outsider monster became the dungeon master and marched outside with an army of dungeon spawn at their disposal, it was a catastrophe known as a horde invasion. In reality, though, such a disaster rarely ever happened. Monsters strong enough to become dungeon masters knew that they couldn’t win against human armies, even with the power of a dungeon at their back. Most of them would lurk in the lowest depths of the dungeon and accumulate power there instead.

“You should go and speak to your father. You should tell him that such a thing should be destroyed as soon as possible.”

“Me? I can’t do anything about it,” I said, incredulous. “My father was the one who ordered for the dungeon to remain untouched for as long as possible.”

“If you’re the one saying it...Duke Denning will listen.”

“What makes you say that?” I asked at length.

I had seen a horde invasion like Alicia was worried about in the anime once. The Traitor Knight, Sepith Pendragon, had perfume in his possession that sent a dragon into a fit of madness. It then brought forth an army of dungeon monsters and advanced upon the surface.

“Even now, the duke is your greatest supporter. Am I wrong?”

“My father probably wouldn’t object to what I say, but... It’ll be fine. The dungeon will be destroyed next week, after all. Plus, we’re in such a remote area. It’s impossible for there to be an outside monster powerful enough to reach the dungeon core anywhere near here.”

Alicia held her tongue for a long moment before she finally said, “Anything is possible.”

“What are you so scared of? Like I said, there’s nothing to worry about.”

“What are you going to do if something *does* happen, though? Remember the mercenary and the Royal Knight? The worst has

happened to me twice now! And now there's a dungeon here! There's no way this is heading in a good direction!" Alicia yelled, raising her voice as her emotions spilled forth.

I hesitated. "If anything happens, I'll save you again."

Alicia was stunned. "*Huh?*"

I knew why she had such an extreme hatred of dungeons. There was a Great Dungeon in Alicia's country known as The Demon's Prison, or Demon Land.

For context, Dungeon City was an adventurer's paradise, and it was one of the cities in the Freedom Union. Even if you combined all the dungeons located there, they wouldn't even reach close to the level of the Great Dungeon in Cirquista, which had been created by a monster that came from the north.

The dungeon master in Demon Land was known as Hannibal, the Demon Lord of the South. Alicia had lived with this very real threat for a long time. She knew better than anyone else in this whole school how fearsome a dungeon could be. She probably couldn't sit still knowing that there was a dungeon so close to campus grounds.

But Alicia didn't have the power to destroy a dungeon all on her own. Neither did Shuya, for that matter, not as he currently was. That was why she'd thought about what she could do, and she'd come to me since I had clout within the army.

"I saved you twice, and I'll save you again a third time if I have to. It doesn't matter how many times you get into trouble. If you're certain that something is going to happen, then I *will* save you."

I'd had deep regrets all this time. One question had always been stuck at the back of my mind: if I caused someone misfortune to grant my selfish wish to be together with Charlotte, was there really happiness waiting for them down the line?

And who suffered the most because of me? Was it House Denning? Was it Daryth? Or was it Charlotte?

No.

"Charlotte said that the first person I should apologize to...is you."

It was surely the girl sitting next to me, Alicia.

"I've caused you a lot of grief up until now. I'm sorry about that. But I don't think you can trust my words after having been through all that, so I'll prove myself through my actions from now on."

This was part of the prologue of my story; this was me declaring my resolution to my former fiancée so that I could be the person I wanted to be. I'd already made myself clear to Charlotte, but I hadn't yet done the same for Alicia. Even when we'd shared a room in Yoram, there had been an insurmountable wall between this anime heroine and me.

She didn't have to believe me. I just wanted my actions to speak for me from now on. And bit by bit, my relationship with Alicia would repair, and...this was a selfish hope on my part, but I hoped that one day she would forgive me.

To be frank, I could see signs of that day coming. After the incident with Sepith, Alicia had changed. Occasionally, *very* occasionally, she would start a conversation with me. Though the exchanges between us were like those of distant friends, the fact that she talked to me at all sent me over the moon.

"Y-Yeah, all right..." she muttered.

But... *Huh?* Alicia wasn't acting like her usual self right now with how she was fidgeting next to me. When she'd first enrolled here, she would brush off male students who came up to her, brutally declaring that they were in the way. The girl next to me didn't seem like the same girl at all.

"Y-You...aren't going to be angry?" I asked cautiously.

She stared straight ahead in silence for a long moment. "Who do you think I am?"

"I mean, well, until just a little while ago, whenever you came face to face with me, you... A lot has happened, you know what I mean?"

"Would you prefer it if I were mad at you?"

"No! Not at all!"

"Then I'm not."

"O-Okay. Thank you... Ah, well, it's a bit weird to be thanking you, but still... Thank you."

What's with this...awkwardness? How do I put it? It reminded me of how innocent and naive we'd been when we first met.

She was...close. *Huh?* Even though our bodies had been touching each other for a while, she didn't seem to have any intentions of moving away from me. I couldn't believe it. And wait, why was she getting so red all of a sudden?! Usually, this was where she would explode on me and scream, "Don't touch meee!"

What was this softness between us? ...*I want to run away right now.*

Before I could, however, she reached her limit first.

"It's a promise!" she suddenly yelled, and she continued without stopping for a breath. "I will *never* forget what you said just now. I-I'll see you around! Shuya's waiting for me!" With that, she scurried off, her skirt flapping in the wind and allowing me a brief glimpse of her snow-white legs. I watched her delicate form shrink in my vision, waiting for my thumping heart to calm down.

I heard a not-so-hushed whisper. "Hey, did you see that?!"

"Yeah! That's what they call 'hitting on girls' on the street, right?! The Piggy Duke's surprisingly a man of action, huh?!"

Wait, wait, wait, hey! Me, hitting on Alicia, of all people?! Wait a hot minute! That's impossible! I'd thought everyone was oddly quiet around us in the middle of our conversation, but they were actually looking at us the whole time?! This is not good!

I decided to start sprinting, and I fled from the scene.



Beneath the canopy of leaves, there was only darkness in the depths of the woods. Even if I looked up at the sky, I couldn't see the sun.

It was said that if anyone were to lose their way in the Lost Woods, they would have a hard time finding their way out. In this forest, sound was the ruler of everything: the sound of the wind rustling through the leaves and the sound of the crystal-clear water flowing along a small stream. On top of that, at times there was also the sound of *something* groaning.

"Oink, oink!" I muttered. Alicia had been very insistent that the dungeon be destroyed, so I'd come all the way here into the forest to check on things and to cool my head while I was at it.

Normally, I'd need to fill out a permission form to leave the school. In my case, however, if I made a light request to the guards, they'd let me out the moment they recognized me. This was probably one of the reasons why Alicia had come to me for help.

"It's all Alicia's fault. She looked so worried that it rubbed off on me," I muttered. "There's no way that a horde invasion would happen so easily. It's not like we've got Sepith's perfume or anything..."

I'd left behind the peaceful chatter of the school and plunged into the extraordinary world beyond. From behind the greenery, a pair of ruby eyes watched me with rapt attention; they were the eyes of a monster. The further I walked into the forest, the more numerous the monsters around me became. At the same time, I started to see soldiers rushing about in a tither chasing monsters that had gotten too close to campus further into the depths of the woods. Most of these monsters had probably come out of the dungeon by mistake. They had nowhere to go and, sensing the presence of humans, they had approached out of curiosity.

"Still, Alicia had a good point... A bunch of weird stuff has happened ever since I learned of the future, like with No Face and Sepith. Both of them were key characters in the anime, though..." I broke off that thought and barked, "Hey, you! You there! Don't get closer to the Baron Orc than you have to! When that monster's agitated, it becomes very aggressive! It'll tear your throat out!"

"Young Master!" a soldier exclaimed. "May I ask why you've come here?"

“I got a little worried about you all... Hey, you! Yeah, you over there! Don’t chase more than you have to! With all these people around here, the monsters should flee if they see you being threatening!” I yelled.

“Understood!” they replied.

“About that, how many openings of the dungeon have been discovered at the moment?” I asked, turning back to the first soldier.

“We have found three! We have left one, which will be used for the dungeon expedition, and have destroyed the rest!”

“It’s a relatively new dungeon, so that sounds about right...” I muttered. “Don’t let your guard down, though, and make sure to remain vigilant. The bigger a dungeon gets, the more openings it will spawn!”

“Understood!”

But clear up to the time the expedition started, not one new opening was reported as discovered.



The dungeon’s entrance lay beyond a dense thicket of trees and was heavily guarded. It made sense; if an outside monster managed to sneak in and get its grubby paws on the dungeon’s core, it would be a disaster. The dungeon had to remain untouched until someone destroyed the dungeon core, be it my father or someone from the school.

“Please be careful, Your Highness.” Captain Heinz knelt on one knee and started to bow his head, but the princess stopped him with a gesture of her hand.

“Thank you,” she said. “I’ll get going now, then.”

As expected, soldiers were well-trained in manners. They were a completely different lot compared to the students, who often acted without restraint.

“Young Master, I wish you the best of luck on the battlefield. Though the dungeon may be new, it is still a perilous place. Nobody knows what could happen in there,” Heinz warned. I’d become familiar with the old soldier by now, though I couldn’t help but notice the gray that peppered his black hair. I nodded gravely at his warning.

“I’m leaving the school in your care in my absence, Heinz,” I said.

“Understood!”

“Charlotte, stick close to me,” I ordered.

“U-Understood!”

The first thing I felt in the dungeon was the chilly air brushing against my cheek. The chill was completely different from the cool breeze in the woods, and there was a distinct stench in here. There

was also *something* echoing out from the cave tunnels that barely constituted a path. Burning torches lined the walls as they ventured forth, the flickering flames further fanning the fear creeping into the group's hearts. From there, we went deep underground to a world where light couldn't reach, the scenery around us completely transforming with every step we took.

A dungeon was a world of darkness created by a core floating silently in the heart of its depths. Here, corpses came to life and monsters walked around as if they owned the place. This was an alien world where humankind's common knowledge didn't apply at all. Sometimes weapons or monsters would suddenly appear from the walls.

When a monster died in the dungeon, they returned to the earth and would only be revived by respawning. If a human died within a dungeon, rumors said that they could revive in the exact same state as they were in during their last moments and become a living corpse. There were even legends that ghosts unable to move beyond this world would be revived in dungeons.

As long as the dungeon core continued to exist, the cycle of life in this underworld would never end. As someone once said, "A dungeon is a dangerous, alien world where the boundary between life and death blurs and fades."

Anything was possible in this underground world full of mysteries. Consisting of a maze of narrow passages, a dungeon got darker the lower you went. People who explored such dungeons were called adventurers, and they continued to enter these places in search of rare loot or the dungeon core in order to destroy it.

I *definitely* wasn't fit for such a career.

"Master Slowe, when does loot appear during an expedition?" Charlotte asked.

"In the case of loot... Look carefully over there, Charlotte. It's probably going to drop any minute now."

With excitement written all over her face, Charlotte looked at the thing that was spawning from the wall. Peeling down from the wall like a layer of paint, the loot fell to the ground as it spawned seemingly out of nowhere.

"Wow!" Charlotte approached to take a closer look. "What is it? Huh? It's a shovel?"

I hesitated. "That's junk, Charlotte. Loot that spawns this early in a dungeon usually isn't worth much."

Dungeon cores didn't just spawn monsters; they sometimes dropped useful weapons or tools as loot. According to one theory, the dungeon core lured humans in with the promise of loot that way.

“Master Slowe, another one! Ah... It’s a shovel again. Why are only shovels appearing?”

“Rumors say that monsters dig their own homes out of the dungeon tunnels with those, but there are a lot of other theories too. Nobody has ever seen a monster using a shovel, though. If we go further down, some rare stuff might drop, but we’re not in very deep yet. It can’t be helped.”

Charlotte thought for a moment. “Are shovels worth any money?”

“Do you think they are?”

Charlotte’s silence was answer enough to show that she’d come to the right conclusion.

Charlotte seemed eager to explore and find cool stuff in the dungeon, so I didn’t want to dash her hopes, but I couldn’t do anything about it. It was really rare to find decent loot in the uppermost levels.

If we were exploring the top levels of Demon Land, that would be a different story. In the anime, Shuya’s former master, a highly ranked adventurer known as the Archflare, found his sword in the middle levels there. The sword was called Flamberge, a legendary blade.

“Quiet down, girl,” Sir Dalton said. “If you get in our way, we’ll leave you behind.”

Charlotte yelped. “Sorry!”

Demon Land was located near the border that ran between Cirquista and Daryth. People said that if the dungeon master there chose to start a horde invasion, Cirquista would be utterly destroyed. Fortunately, Hannibal didn’t seem intent on starting a horde invasion so far, and Demon Land was currently an excellent hunting ground for highly ranked adventurers.

In these past few decades, famous adventurers had formed factions with the aid of Cirquista to work tirelessly to seize the dungeon core there. But so far, no one had ever been able to so much as catch a glimpse of the dungeon master.

“Your Highness, there is a pack of orcs coming this way! I shall lure them here!” Sir Kushner exclaimed.

The knights moved with practiced ease. They’d probably conducted extensive studies on the dungeon before coming in. They disarmed traps set up by monsters, they avoided the rooms that would result in being swarmed by a mob of monsters, and they were able to accurately predict the dungeon’s layout. Thanks to them, our exploration of the dungeon went without much trouble.

“Thank you, Kushner. If you lead them this way, I shall destroy them all,” one of the knights replied.

“Everything is going well so far, Your Highness,” Sir Dalton said.

“Indeed, Dalton,” the princess affirmed with a nod.

Still, the way Princess Carina carried herself and the things she focused her gaze on... It was clear that she was a way more powerful mage compared to the students at school. One of the reasons for that was due to the special education from the Cardinal and his associates since she was royalty, but above all, the spirits *adored* her.

She mainly used light magic to destroy the monsters, but from the looks of the spirits flying around her, she probably was able to use water and wind magic as well. The princess took out the monsters with light magic in the blink of an eye; she was likely taking out her pent-up stress from spending all her time dealing with the students on them.

Charlotte stared hard at the princess as she did that. Even so, Charlotte wouldn't gain much just by watching the princess. To be frank, there was too much of a difference in skill between the two of them.

“Dalton. Was this the place in the soldier's report?” the princess asked.

“Yes, it was,” Sir Dalton nodded. “As such, we shall search this area thoroughly. Kushner, Delbane, Heine, spread out. I shall stay with the princess.”



“Roger that!” the three knights said in unison.

And with that, the Royal Knights scattered. From what I knew, their goal was to find the dragon hatchling, but...

Monsters who were highly independent like dragons would immediately leave the dungeon once they developed a clear sense of self. Once that happened, they wouldn’t become attached to humans. *The Cardinal’s reaching for quite the absurd dream*, I thought wryly.

“Dennin’. Were these guys like this the whole time?” Professor Loco Moco asked at length.

“Yes, they are quite the sight. It’s all very one-sided,” I replied.

In the middle of our expedition, Professor Loco Moco met up with us and joined us. Apparently, the original plan had been for him to protect the princess in the Royal Knights’ stead while they searched for the dragon hatchling, but by the looks of Princess Carina right now, she probably didn’t need any guards at all, let alone a former adventurer-turned-professor.

“From the looks of it, I probably didn’t need ta come here, eh?” the professor muttered.

“I have to be honest; I didn’t realize that Princess Carina was *this* good at magic,” I said.

“The princess is stronger than an average Royal Knight. When I joined the Order and first saw her skills, it really put me in my place...” The professor trailed off before taking a sharp breath of realization. “Dennin’, forget I just said that.”

The Order had an abundance of military prowess despite rarely needing to use it, and the professor had started questioning the ways of the Order. As a result of that, he’d left.

I knew that the professor had always regretted running away from the person he’d sworn to protect. That was why the professor always felt guilt towards the royal family of Daryth. In the anime, he ended up interacting with the Order through Shuya and his pals, and he was able to hold his head up high again after that.

“Ah, Loco Moco Highland. You came,” the princess chimed.

“Y-Your Highness! I-It has been a very long time since last we met... You have my deepest apologies for being unable to greet you properly up until now...” The professor was very reserved in front of the princess, and he was completely different from his usual, cheery self.

Seeing the professor like that, the princess stopped in her tracks. Sir Dalton took over the monsters she’d been dealing with. They were a dream team; they didn’t even have to exchange words to cover each other.

“Greet?” The princess paused for a moment. “Oh, you’re also talking about back when you quit the Order, right? If you’re worried about that, then don’t be. I don’t mind at all. I’m not someone who *would* mind either. You know that, don’t you?” The princess continued on without waiting for a reply. “Anyway, you were what surprised me the most when I came to this school, Sir Highland.”

“...M-Me?”

“Yeah. You always looked so gloomy during your time in the Order, but you were really lively here. The students seem to look up to you too, so I think that you made the right choice.”

The professor was at a loss for words.

“Right now, you aren’t a Royal Knight, so please continue to protect this school from now on. Do I make myself clear?”

“Y-Yes! Please leave it to me!!!” The professor looked as if someone had just turned his entire world upside down.

Back when he was in the Order, the professor had been seen as a failure of a Royal Knight. He’d never been able to awaken light magic, despite it being an essential skill for a Royal Knight.

The person who’d now saved the professor from his internal strife...was none other than the Little Daryth herself. I hadn’t expected such meaningful words from the princess who had holed herself away in her bedroom to hide from the kids her age.

Moved, Professor Loco Moco almost seemed like he would hug the princess at any moment, but Sir Dalton pushed him away immediately.

However, through all this, I managed to realize one thing. The Royal Knights who’d come along to the school with the princess all poked their nose into the professor’s affairs whenever they had the opportunity. But that was their way of showing their concern for him, if I had to guess.

“Highland!” Sir Dalton barked. “Being moved by the princess’s compassion is your own business, but I have my doubts about your attitude in class!”

“What did you just say, Dalton?! You wanna start a fight?! You start complainin’ the moment you see my face! You ain’t my superior or anythin’ anymore, y’know?!”

Now that the professor looked as if a weight had been lifted from his shoulders, I realized something. The professor’s guilty conscience from quitting the Order was now resolved, which brought his arc to a close. *Wow, I didn’t think that the professor’s problem would be solved this quickly.* Was this because of me in a way, since I’d changed the future?

A horrified scream broke the air, bringing this beautiful moment to an abrupt halt.

“Master Slowe! Mo-Mo-Mo...!!!”

“What?”

“Monsters! There’s a lot of them coming from that direction!”

Yelling inside a dungeon was a breach of etiquette. But Charlotte threw that rule right out the window with her loud scream.

I followed the line of Charlotte’s sight, and there was... *Ah, jeez, there really is a big group of monsters. They probably gathered their comrades sometime during all that.*

“That! That! That thing! Master Slowe, monsters! Aaah! They’re coming! Aaah!!!”

“Charlotte, it’s dangerous if you swing your knife around like that! Calm down!” I pleaded.

Charlotte seized one of the Royal Knights by the arm, begging them to do something about the horde.

She was having a panic attack, and a severe one at that.

The Royal Knights looked at Charlotte oddly while Princess Carina destroyed the monsters one-sidedly with her own abilities, chuckling to herself quietly all the while.

Even after that, the Royal Knights eyed Charlotte with curious looks from time to time.

In other words...

“Aaah! Th-That thing! That wriggly thing is coming! A slithering...*thing!*”

Though they said nothing, their gazes spoke volumes, silently asking, “Is that girl *really* a Denning retainer?”

They had the same questioning look Sepith had worn towards Charlotte at first during our time in Yoram. It was nearly a tradition at this point.

Under the inky canvas of the starless night sky, I spent a long time with my arm propped on the ledge of the window, staring out at the dense forest.

I felt the breeze flowing in. There was complete silence at this time of day, almost unbelievable in comparison to the ruckus on campus during the day. It was a perfect time to indulge myself in the world of thoughts and contemplation.

“Oiiink! Oiiink!”

Just saying, that wasn’t me. Snorting echoed out from the woods in all directions. It was actual orcs making the noise, orcs that had probably crawled out of the dungeon somewhere and decided to live out in nature instead.

In Kirsch, I could sometimes hear the sounds of beasts and monsters coming from the surrounding forest at night. Some students found these sounds frightening, and thought that the monsters in the

forest making them must be eliminated. But these monsters were best left alone because killing them might disrupt the ecosystem.

Several long, insistent snorts rang out again.

“Jeez, they’re so loud...” I muttered. “They’re louder than Charlotte when she’s in the dungeon.”

Charlotte had humiliated herself during our expedition in the dungeon, and the experience had crushed her morale. Before we’d embarked on our journey, she had been very motivated, but she was the complete opposite now.

Though Charlotte’s spell had been effective on the pebble, it didn’t do a thing against monsters. Not only that, but Charlotte and I’d had to leave the dungeon before everyone else under the instructions of Princess Carina, who’d said that we might negatively affect the expedition.

“She doesn’t have to be so depressed about it though...” I sighed.

On our way back to school, Charlotte had profusely apologized to me. It seemed that she thought she had caused me to lose face. But I hadn’t ever sought fighting prowess from Charlotte before this point, so it was asking too much for her to suddenly become useful in a dungeon.

Since we’d left the dungeon pretty early on, we had nothing to do. I’d thought about loitering on campus, but I didn’t want people to think that I was skipping class, so I’d ended up spending my day lazing around in my room. I’d also thought about holding a debriefing about our trip in the dungeon since we had the time, but Charlotte was disheartened, and she’d locked herself up in her room.

Princess Carina and Charlotte had swapped places. The second hermit princess was born.

“Still... Princess Carina seemed to cheer up a little.”

After returning from the dungeon safe and sound, Princess Carina had been bombarded by a swarm of students wanting to hear about what had happened. Princess Carina had answered them willingly, and she’d gotten to interact more with the students at school, just as the Cardinal wished.

Princess Carina had spotted me from within the swarm of students, and she’d shaken her head somewhat wryly. So they hadn’t managed to find a dragon hatchling after all.

Watching the princess had reminded me of what Charlotte had said to me a while back. “After all, Master Slowe,” she’d said, “you were the one who got me to go outside!”

I had thought about the meaning of those words afterward. Back when the two of us had only just met, Charlotte had detested going outside in any way, and I only managed to bring her outside after a lot

of hard work. She'd probably been referring to that.

"Oiiink..." A snort sounded out yet again, this time a little more distant.

Back then, I had been desperate. In House Denning, we needed to have a good reason for taking a traumatized child into our custody. I relied on trial and error for days on end to make Charlotte go outside, even though she didn't like the outside world. I did it all so that I could cheer Charlotte up, even just a little, and also so that everyone would think she had the potential to be useful in our house.

The snorting grew quiet, and there was silence again.

"The orcs have gone quiet, so I suppose I'll sleep now." I shut my window.

Right at that moment, there was a knock on my door behind me. I had an unexpected guest. For one moment, I thought it might be Princess Carina, but there was no way that the princess would come this late at night. The Royal Knights wouldn't ever allow it. On top of that, I recognized the specific way this visitor knocked.

"Charlotte, what's wrong?" I asked.

The girl who'd become the second hermit princess made her appearance.

Her hair was a mess, and her face was haggard. Her eyes were slightly puffy and lifeless. I hadn't seen her in such a state in a long time, not since the time when my father banned her from using a wand.

I watched over Charlotte in silence. She sank down onto the chair and stared down at the floor in dejection, lamenting. I wasn't able to see her expression beyond the curtain of her dangling hair.

After a while, Charlotte finally opened her mouth to break the silence. "I haven't changed at all from before."

"That's not true. You've gotten way better at magic since then."

"But none of my spells worked against the monsters. Not only that, but to think that I lost my composure... I thought that I would be okay with them now, and yet... I was such a pathetic sight, and even the princess saw me like that... I am so sorry."

"A lot of people aren't good with monsters. On top of that, growing older doesn't mean that your fear of monsters would disappear overnight."

"Are there things that you also have a hard time dealing with, Master Slowe?" Charlotte asked after a long moment.

"There are."

"Please tell me."

"Your pet, Charlotte," I answered immediately. "Whenever

something happened, that guy would try to intimidate me. I'll be honest; I'm actually being bullied by that guy."

Charlotte laughed. She seemed to think I was joking.

This was the truth, though. If Shuya could be said to be Alicia's slave, then the Great Spirit was walking all over me. Whenever Charlotte gave them awful food, I needed to prepare a first-class meal to please them. If anyone suspicious approached Charlotte, the Great Spirit would become grumpy, so I would make those people leave, sometimes with brute force.

Charlotte sighed. "Just because my spell started to stabilize a bit, I let it get to my head... And I panicked, seeing monsters in a dark place..." Charlotte groaned. "I'm such a no-good retainer... I'm absolutely pathetic..."

"That's not true, Charlotte."

"The only monster that I'm not afraid of would be that earthworm at best. I can't use magic, I'm a scaredy-cat, and the only thing I can do is the work of a maid..." Charlotte trailed off. "Ah, but I shattered a plate a while back... Haaah. I'm a no-good retainer...and I still end up asking for something selfish."

"Something selfish?"

Charlotte hesitated. "Master Slowe, may I sleep together with you in here tonight?"

"Oink?!" I blurted out.

"Seeing so many monsters really scared me. I slept with you in Yoram, and...even though it was only on the very first day, I was able to sleep soundly that night."

"Sure. Then, I'll take the sofa over here—"

"I have one more selfish request to make." Charlotte paused. "I want you to be with me, Master Slowe, just like when we were kids... Is that asking too much?"

Back in the day, Charlotte had asked this of me every single day. As a child, she wasn't just scared of monsters; she was terrified of the dark, *especially* the dark of night. She'd probably experienced a horrific time during her journey from Huzak to my family's lands before finally making it to safety. From what I knew, she had even stayed up until dawn all by herself. These were all experiences too cruel for a young child to endure.

"Sure, Charlotte. It's been a while since we last shared a bed. Let's do that."

And besides...there was no way I'd be opposed to that, even without all those reasons.

"Hmm. Let's start again from the beginning, then. Orc," I said.

"Then I'll go with...the wriggly thing I saw for the first time today, that Curly Worm," Charlotte replied.

“Ah, so you’ve memorized its name already, huh? A monster that starts with the letter M... Then, I’ll go with—”

We were playing a name chain game on the bed, entertaining ourselves while reviewing monster names. Charlotte must’ve studied the monster encyclopedia I had given to her because she was able to hold her own against me. *Me*, the one who had a glorious, undefeated record at this game.

Still, saying all these monster names reminds me of that time in the anime, whether I like it or not. That time Sepith’s secret perfume had caused a horde invasion. He’d used it to summon the dungeon master, an earth dragon. This incident was one of the biggest catalysts that triggered Shuya’s powers to awaken in the anime.

“Charlotte, it’s your turn.”

Charlotte paused for a moment. “Ah, by the way, I just remembered that I wanted to ask you something, Master Slowe.”

“Me?”

“I’ll get right to the point! How far have you gotten with Lady Alicia?”

I nearly snorted, but I held it in. “Wait a minute! Why would you mention Alicia right now?!”

“I mean, it’s the talk of the school these days! Everyone says that you’re both absolutely smitten with each other!”

“Tell me the details, Charlotte!”

According to Charlotte, the school’s rumor mill was making a fuss about a supposedly intimate conversation I’d had with Alicia a while back.

It took me a moment to process that. *Oh, that! That time Alicia told me to destroy the dungeon. True, there was a weird vibe between us, but... Nothing we talked about was material enough to fuel rumors. I only told her that I was going to prove my repentance for everything through my actions! That was all!*

Plus, Alicia probably wouldn’t be pleased with the rumors unearthing a relationship that had long since ended. I desperately tried to clear up the misunderstanding, insisting that nothing was going on between Alicia and me.

But Charlotte wouldn’t let the topic go. I showed Charlotte the latest monster encyclopedia to direct her attention elsewhere. Even though she didn’t look it, Charlotte was addicted to following the latest trends as much as she was addicted to gossip. It wasn’t long before she lost herself in a page describing famous adventurers.

I watched her in silence, a little exasperated. I peered at the book in her hands and saw she’d come to a page illustrating a charismatic adventurer by the name of the Eye of the Crimson Lotus. The man was kind-looking and had recently achieved the status of S-rank in the

Adventurers' Guild. A young, charismatic hero with a mysterious past, he'd also played a big role in the anime. Everything about him was shrouded in mystery, from his true name to his personal history.

While Charlotte was reading the page introducing him, she suddenly lifted her head and whispered, "Master Slowe... If I were to tell you that I'm hiding a secret like this person, what would you do?"

"Huh? You, hiding a secret?"

"On this page, it says that this guild member keeps a lot of secrets. What if I were keeping some really important secret, just like this person is? Not a small secret either. A big, biiiig secret."

I mulled on it for a moment. "I'd...punish you by making you skip lunch or something, I guess?"

"Master Slowe! You might think I look at the world through rose-colored lenses, but please answer my questions seriously even if that's the case!" Charlotte exclaimed.

"You still remember that? But, well... If you're hiding a secret, of course I'd want to know about it, but... I think I'd probably be okay waiting until the day you're ready to bring it up, Charlotte."

Something in my answer seemed to click with her, and Charlotte crawled under the blankets and went to sleep after I'd said it. I, on the other hand, was deep in thought. *My answer just now was perfect. It was an answer that didn't rush her, and had a lot of compassion and understanding to boot. I'm honestly impressed at myself for being able to come up with it.* But, at the same time...I couldn't help but question myself internally too. *Was that really the best way to do it?*

I turned off the lamp and was about to head to bed as well, but at that moment, the Great Spirit of Wind appeared. "Meeeeeow."

I hadn't even heard the door open, but I'd get nowhere if I put too much thought into matters concerning this spirit. I looked carefully at the cat; there were bits of food left on the corner of its mouth. *Where were they, and what were they doing, I wonder?*

"Hey, Great Spirit of Wind. Why was Charlotte suddenly successful at magic?" I asked.

"I don't know what goes on in the minds of light spirits, meow."

Even though Charlotte was tossed about due to the war between the Dustour Empire and the nations in the south, she never awakened her magic properly in the anime, not even once. But now her skill in magic was awakening, albeit slightly. Watching her, I could only come to one conclusion.

"The light spirits reacted to how Charlotte had a change of heart... That's what I think. Am I wrong?"

The Great Spirit of Wind said nothing.

The Great Spirits were the bosses of spirits. At least, that was how

I interpreted it, and I didn't think I was too far off. Sometimes, the Great Spirit of Wind and wind spirits would chase each other around. There was clearly a hierarchy or something like it at play. I didn't know more than that though.

Meanwhile, Altanger continued to keep their silence. Maybe they didn't plan on going into detail about the matter with a human. As far as I was concerned, their lack of an answer was answer enough.

"Then, I'll change the question. Great Spirit, do you think that Charlotte will ever reveal her secret in the future?" I asked.

After a pause, the spirit answered. "I don't think such a day will come, meow. But—"



—if we're just referring to her telling you alone, then such a future might be possible.

The Great Spirit of Wind swallowed these words before they could be voiced, and the spirit leapt onto the bed. And then, they slept, snoring softly from their spot between the boy and his retainer.



"Seriously? How could anyone just go to sleep with the way that was going?" I couldn't help but ask out loud.

Whoever said that "the opposite of love was indifference" was right on the mark. The Great Spirit of Wind was invested in Charlotte, but they didn't care about me at all. They'd always been like that. No matter how much I suffered, this spirit wouldn't ever lift a finger to help me.

But Altanger wasn't exactly a special case. In the anime, the other Great Spirits reacted in the same way. They were all self-centered beings who only acted on their own behalf, a fact I knew very well.

I heaved a heavy sigh. "I thought it would just be the two of us, Charlotte and me... Oh well."

The Great Spirit of Wind curled up right against Charlotte. Compared to the past, seeing the two of them like this was very peaceful. I felt a small spark of joy light up within me.

Interlude: The Ruined Kingdom's Princess and the Ducal House

Boundless, breathtaking nature expanded beyond the horizon. This land, where people lived in harmony with the limitless greenery, belonged to House Denning. This flourishing land—which was beloved by the wind itself—was home to countless wind spirits, though the humans who lived there could not see them.

A child of only six years stood in a manor situated in the heart of this land, its halls adorned with red carpets. Despite his young age, the child already had two personal knights by his side.

“Claude, follow me. It’s an emergency,” the boy ordered.

“An emergency? W-Wait, Lord Slowe! Where are you going? If you leave without permission, the duke will scold you again,” Claude cautioned.

“Father is currently in the capital. He won’t find out if you don’t report my absence as my caretaker... Ah, yes. Silva, you come too. This isn’t going to be peaceful, most likely.”

“Heck yeah!” Silva cheered. “Perfect timing. I have spare time right now!”

“Um... Lord Slowe! Whenever you do something brash, *I* am the one who gets an earful!” Claude exclaimed. “How many times have I told you that you shouldn’t act out of line?!”

The child marched through the corridor, and the two men in crimson coats hurriedly followed after him. Butlers and servants smiled warmly at them as they passed, shuffling aside to allow the three of them to walk off.

“How many times do I have to repeat this before you get it, Mister Claude? Following our lord is all we have to do, no questions asked. The young lord seems to see something we can’t, after all,” Silva said.

The boy with black hair, the one the child had called Silva, still looked quite childlike himself; he was right in the middle of his growth spurt. He was talking to the tall man, Claude, who seemed hesitant about going forward.

“You’re too careless, Silva,” Claude said slowly. “Don’t forget the existence of assassins. These are not peaceful times. Even on Denning lands, such dangerous people are able to come and go. What would you do if something happened to Lord Slowe?”

“If that happens, I’ll save him again,” Silva insisted.

“You’re overconfident. The world is a big place, Silva. There are plenty of people out there who are stronger than you.”

“If I remember right, though, you mentioned that you’ve never left Daryth before,” Silva reminded him. “If we’re looking at it from that standpoint, then I know the world better than you do.”

Claude did not reply.

Claude looked scarcely a day over twenty years old. From the conversation, one could say that this man with a burly build was being looked down upon by Silva. Claude cut off the conversation, turning his attention instead to the young child walking before him.

The child was the third son of Duke Denning, known as the Prodigy of Wind, and his fame knew no bounds.

A few months earlier, there had been an incident where Slowe Denning was targeted by assassins. Ever since then, two guards appointed by Duke Denning, called the Knights of the Twin Wings, had accompanied his beloved son at all times, as the boy had the habit of going outside by himself.

“Mister Claude. Our lord has been a little different ever since monsters broke through into Huzak,” Silva noted.

Claude Mustahd was the Knight of the Right Wing. House Mustahd, a viscount house, was a branch family of House Denning, and Claude was the extremely talented second son of Viscount Mustahd.

His brown hair had a tint of crimson in it, and he had a memorable, surly face that suited someone like him who would follow instructions to the letter. Even now, the solemn man pressed his lips into a thin, tight line as he walked. This man was the one who was assigned to watch over Slowe.

“Lord Slowe grieves over the fact that he wasn’t able to do anything about the war in Huzak.” Claude paused briefly. “He is a kindhearted child. Also, stop calling me ‘mister.’ I’m not yet old enough to be called that.”

“Mister, you have bedhead. And compared to us, you are definitely adult enough.”

“Ah... That may be true, but the people you’re using in your sample are too young.”

“Well, you have a point,” Silva said, and he grinned slightly.

The boy knight, Silva, was a commoner youth. Despite his status, he was the one who had saved Slowe during an assassination attempt a few months prior, and his skill with the blade was exceptional enough to impress even Duke Denning. Unlike Claude, who kept an eye on Slowe Denning, the commoner swordsman’s job was to *protect*

Slowe from danger. That was the only thing that mattered to him.

“Now, let’s head off, milord. What kind of fun things await us today?” Silva asked.

In the early morning, the three took off on their horses and galloped at full speed down the forest road. They took their meal by horseback, not slowing in their stride as they chewed on their bread. At times, they would wave at the people working diligently in the fields; at others, they would pay their respects to the animals that inhabited the land. With the pleasant chirping of birds accompanying them, the scenery passed them by in their rush.

Feeling the refreshing breeze against them, the two knights navigated the many winding roads with ease. Morning dew gathered on the tips of leaves, and they seemed to glimmer in the air.

Slowe, on the other hand, didn’t have the heart to enjoy the beautiful scenery of their journey at all. He was lost deep in thought.

“Lord Slowe, if we continue down this way, we will approach our national border with Huzak,” said Claude.

“Milord, we mustn’t go any further than this,” Silva added in warning.

Slowe narrowed his eyes and looked hard at one of the branches of the three-way fork in the road before them from his position at the front of Silva’s saddle.

“No, that’s not the right way,” Slowe said, pointing. “*That* way. Go that way.”

“Is there something ahead, milord?” Silva asked.

“You’ll know if you go.” Slowe brushed off the question. “Also, I will be thinking about some matters of import after this, so please don’t talk to me for a while.”

“All righty! Loud and clear!”

Before they knew it, their journey took them off the road and down an animal trail. The three dismounted their horses and continued walking down the trackless path.

Bright sunlight shone into the forest, a paradise for animals. Passing rain might have showered on the forest earlier in the morning, and cool, clear beads of water dripped from the canopy of leaves from time to time. Claude led the way, using his height to his advantage, pushing away branches that obstructed his head with a hint of annoyance at the plants.

After trekking through the dense trees for a while, they came to an open field. There were many passenger carriages and cargo wagons parked there. A range of people had gathered here, from the obscenely rich to lowlife thugs, all laughing vulgarly. All of them were perusing

the few dozen people standing on a makeshift podium, making heated negotiations amongst themselves.

The three had stumbled across what was most likely a black market auction, and it was obvious what goods they were discussing. The three hid behind trees and watched the trade of slaves from their spot.

“Mister Claude, the slave trade is banned in this country, isn’t it?” Silva asked slowly.

“Of course. Daryth puts order and tradition above all. There was some trouble with the Freedom Union when the alliance was first formed because of that cultural difference. You probably know that too, Silva.”

“Yeah, that’s what I thought. Oh? That old geezer talking on the stage... The necklace he’s wearing is an inverted cross of rebellion. Huh. I didn’t think that the Freedom Union’s Guild of Rebellion would dare do their dirty business here. On Denning lands of all places. Honestly.”

“Just how good are your eyes?” Claude asked, shocked.

“Mister Claude, your eyes are as narrow as always. Are you still sleepy?”

“Don’t mess around,” Claude snapped.

Unlike the Freedom Union, where everything was free game, this country valued the strict rule of law above all else.

“Those children... By the look of them, they had to have fled from Huzak and fallen into the hands of Freedom Union merchants who’d lain in wait for easy pickings at the country’s border. Wow, all the kids they caught are pretty-looking ones... The old geezer sure has a clear preference,” Silva muttered in disgust.

“I’d heard that most of the refugees escaped to the Freedom Union through Cirquista, but some must have broken through the barricade of monsters and escaped to Daryth...”

Slowe only half-listened to the two knights’ low conversation. There was a girl right in the middle of the abductees who didn’t stand especially out of place, and it was hard to distinguish her unless one squinted. The moment he saw her, Slowe’s expression shifted slightly.

“So that’s how it is...” he murmured.

Slowe understood the situation; he didn’t even have to ask the spirits to explain. Even though the war between the monsters and Huzak had drawn to a close, the Dustour Empire had seen this as a good opportunity and sent in troops to Huzak. Slowe had an idea of what their aim was.

After all, the princess of Huzak, Charlotte Lily Huzak, was still missing.

An old man rubbed his hands together as he approached the three people who'd suddenly appeared from the dense trees. "Well, well. What do we have here? Since you know of this place, you are either comrades who love freedom, or you are intruders."

The man was most likely one of the organizers of the auction. This man also had an inverted cross earring on his ear, a symbol of the Guild of Rebellion, just like the man on the podium.

"If you are the former, I welcome you, but..." The old man noticed Slowe and followed his gaze to see what he was staring at. "Oh, the child seems to be interested in that girl over there. They look to be of a similar age. Surely she will be a very good playmate for him when they both come of age."

"Milord, please look at the price tag on that girl. She has more zeroes attached to her number compared to the others. She was probably a girl of quite high status once."

"How uncouth of you, Silva," Claude reprimanded.

"Oops. Sorry, mister," Silva said.

The highest price tag in this auction, in fact, was on that girl. The merchants probably knew that the girl was born of noble blood. They likely intended to put off selling her here, where she could only sell for rock-bottom prices, instead making her purchase impossible until they came to an area with more bidders and bigger purses.

Slowe was quiet, and Silva was concerned. "Milord? Is something wrong?"

At that moment, however, Slowe was losing his composure. Rage, a deep, bottomless rage, simmered and seethed in the air. The Great Spirit of Wind bled emotions into the air, and spirits sensitive to the presence of others of their kind scrambled to flee from the area.

"It appears you are not, in fact, fellow comrades, I see," the old man said slowly.

The thugs and the hired men were also starting to cast furtive glances towards Slowe and his two knights, watching their every move.

The old man turned towards the only adult in the group: the straightforward Claude. The old man glared at him with a threat in his eyes; if the knight caused a stir here, the guards and his comrades wouldn't take it lying down. However, Claude looked completely unruffled by the glare.

These people at the auction had yet to realize anything. Though the crimson coat might have been unfamiliar in lands of the Freedom Union where they enjoyed free rein, it was the ultimate symbol of justice in Daryth, the Country of Knights.

“Ah, well.” Claude cleared his throat. “Silva. Our lord seems to find these people very distasteful indeed. Unfortunately, we do not have money on us, and we cannot buy these girls off them. However! The trade of slaves in Daryth is illegal. All of this aside, this is House Denning territory, and we are knights officially conferred by the lord of this land.”

Almost as if Claude was trying to quell his master’s anger, he raised his voice on purpose and put on an exaggerated act.

“Indeed, playing such a role is pretty fitting for me, since I’m a commoner.” Silva nodded, backing Claude up in his slightly awkward attempt to reassure Slowe. Then, Silva knelt before Slowe. Silva had never seen such an expression on Slowe’s face before. It was almost as if he was about to cry, but simultaneously furious, fearful, and resolute.

“Milord. But give me an order, and that’s all you need to do,” Silva said.

“An order...? Ah, yeah... Yeah, that’s right,” Slowe mumbled.

The commoner boy liked this child. Silva was so fond of him, in fact, that he’d taken a fancy to living as this child’s knight for the rest of his life, even though Silva himself had no relatives at all. Well, technically, he did have an ulterior motive, juuust slightly. By serving the great noble house of Daryth, House Denning, he might receive something like a title of nobility one day.

“Just be yourself, milord. Us Knights of the Twin Wings exist to serve you,” Silva continued.

“Lord Slowe, it is exactly as he says. As long as you have Silva and me, we should be able to deal with most situations,” Claude declared.

Slowe looked up at the two knights, kneeling down before him and waiting for orders with hands over their hearts. *I can’t see their faces very well due to the light shining through the leaves behind them, but they really are too good for me*, Slowe thought.

So that he could answer their faith in him, Slowe spoke without hesitation. “Destroy this place.”

The two knights stood, answering Slowe Denning’s order.

Claude fixed his gaze on the slave auction with anger in his eyes; it was an unforgivable concept in Daryth. He spoke to the young boy standing next to him. “Silva, I’ll leave the left to you. I’ll take care of the right.”

Silva pitied the devout believers of freedom standing on the makeshift podium. *As a fellow comrade who loves freedom, I’ll take these people as a perfect example of what I shouldn’t do*, he thought and nodded to himself inwardly. Then, like always, he replied jokingly to his senior knight as he stepped forward. “Don’t drag me down, Mister

Claude.”

All humor vanished from his expression when both of the two knights began to sprint. They drew their swords without hesitation and crossed steel with the guards. They mercilessly cut down all who'd dared participate in illegal trade on Denning lands.

But Slowe Denning did not even look for a second at the ruckus the knights were causing. His eyes were fixed solely on the young girl weighed down by iron shackles, and he burnt the image of her into his mind.

The small girl with sullied silver hair didn't look at the uproar that was going on. She didn't flee like the others either. She was still, as if she was trying to weather the storm, and the girl's large eyes were staring off into space, somewhere far away, under the same sky.

The girl didn't register the magnificent scenery of the Denning lands, which existed in harmony with the serene green of nature. Slowe had no idea what the silver-haired girl was thinking.

He also couldn't decipher what it was she clutched to her chest, clinging to it for dear life.

“Slowe. We're running away.”

“Okay, thanks for telling me. I'll calm the anger of the Great Spirit,” Slowe replied.

Up until this moment, Slowe Denning had never heard the voices of spirits this clearly.

Indeed. This child had been led here to this place by the spirits. Hearing that a Great Spirit could go berserk at any moment, he'd rushed all the way here.

Humans typically couldn't hear the voices of the spirits, beings that were blessings of nature. The spirits didn't always bring good news; the last time Slowe heard their voices, there had been a large wildfire in the forest, and it had been on the brink of becoming a catastrophe of an unprecedented scale.

As for now... Now he understood why the spirits had brought him here. *So the Great Spirit of Wind sought refuge in Daryth together with the princess of Huzak*, he thought.

Huzak had been destroyed, and its princess and great guardian spirit had escaped to this country. Slowe didn't know what they wished to do, nor what they would bring to Daryth. Perhaps, they might bring calamity down upon his family's lands. But now that he knew of their existence, there was no way he could leave them like this.

If I let them be, great harm will be caused to the Denning lands... Now then, where are you right now, Great Spirit of Wind? And what in the world do you look like? The prodigy of Denning hardened his resolve,

and he stepped forward.



“Ugh, what are you doing?! You only need to worry about those two people! They’re your only opponents! How much money do you think I paid to hire you all?!”

She ran, and ran, and ran, as far as her legs could carry her. She lost count of how many times she thought she would die. She lost count of how many times she was hungry and starved in misery.

What saddened her the most, however, was seeing the lives lost for her sake.

She lost count of how many times she cried. She lost count of how many times she convinced herself that it was all a terrible dream.

“Those two are knights of House Denning! They aren’t just any random knights! They are warriors who can rival the Royal Knights—No, they are warriors who are even stronger than them!”

By now, the castle and the surrounding town must’ve been in ruins. Everything was probably destroyed, and all the places from her memories were gone.

Though she was young, she still understood that everyone was going somewhere, leaving her behind.

Though she was young, she ended up understanding where everyone went.

And in the end, she was all alone.

Her happy memories were painted over with suffering, and many times she thought that she would rather die.

“That was why I objected to holding this here! Picking a fight with House Denning in this country is asking for death!”

That was why I decided on this: I wouldn’t cry anymore. I absolutely wouldn’t cry.

After all, I’m going to forget it all. They took away my clothes, my wand... I am no longer a princess. Everything in my memories is a lie.

They are lies, so I am not sad. I won’t shed any more tears.

The world in her vision became blurry. The once vibrant world lost all its colors, and she couldn’t even see the things right in front of her clearly.

That is why I won’t accept any of it.

“What the hell are you guys?! Why—”

The only thing Charlotte could do in retaliation to this cruel world was to reject anything and everything in it.



The young Charlotte didn’t realize the changing situation around

her in her torpor. She didn't notice the two knights, who appeared out of nowhere, fighting below the podium. She didn't notice that everyone other than her had already fled.

Someone entered her hazy world. She cracked open her eyes slightly. There was a boy about the same height as her in front of her. He wasn't an adult, and that fact alone made Charlotte a little relieved.

"Hello. My name is Slowe. What's yours?"

"..."

"Can you hear my voice?"

Charlotte did not utter a single word. Though she could hear him, she suddenly felt embarrassed, and she didn't reply. Up until just a little while ago, she'd also worn more high-class clothing, like he did. Her clothes had been soft and warm, and just wearing them had made her feel like she was wrapped in a blanket.

She didn't want to show herself in such a pitiful state to a boy her age. But the boy spoke unhindered, and Charlotte couldn't tell whether he knew what she was thinking or not.

"Everyone kidnapped by them has run away. Are you not going to run too?"

Of course, she ignored him. The young girl didn't respond to his questions; she only stared into space.

"What do I do now...? Hm? That's—" Slowe focused on the thing that Charlotte was hugging. To be frank, he had been curious about it for a while.

From what he could see, he guessed it was a plush toy. One of its eyes and ears were missing, and stuffing was coming out of its left foot. It had transformed into an eerie creature, almost as if it was originally a monster in the first place. Slowe was curious about what animal this toy was supposed to be.

"By the way, what's that you've got there? It's in pretty bad shape."

Charlotte showed her first reaction after she heard those words. Her body tensed up, and she tightened her arms around the item she carried.

Slowe's intuition told him that this item was the only small thread tying the princess of Huzak to this world.

"Is it a puppy? Or is it a cat?" He tried to peer a little closer. "It has four feet, and its one ear is small. It's a little puppy. I'm right, aren't I?"

Charlotte glared at the boy before her with her big eyes. To Charlotte, this soft toy was a friend, a comrade in arms that consoled her all this time. Charlotte couldn't understand how someone could think that her friend was a puppy, no matter what angle they were

looking at him from.

Charlotte looked down at the toy she was hugging. There, in her arms, was a dirty soft toy falling apart. He had also lost his black left eye. True, maybe it couldn't be helped that the boy had made that mistake.

"...ong." Her voice was small and hoarse.

She sounded almost like she'd forgotten how to speak, as if she was trying to regain her voice. The sound she made was unintelligible, fumbling as she went.

Charlotte was supposed to have forgotten everything. But she couldn't very well stay silent after hearing her friend being called a puppy, of all things.

"That's strange. It doesn't look like anything other than a little puppy to me."

In all honesty, she hadn't intended on responding to the boy's words. Since the whole world was a lie, she'd thought she'd ignore him. And yet...

Within Charlotte's vision, Slowe, who was tilting his head in question, started coming into focus.

He isn't a little puppy. You're wrong. This little one is a soft toy filled with all kinds of memories, she thought.

"Y...You're wrong. This boy...is..." she stammered.

It all came back to her. All the memories that Charlotte had tried to forget played vividly in her mind.

Painful memories. But before she reached the painful memories she'd wanted to forget, she found her memories from happier days.

"This... This boy...is..." she rasped.

Charlotte's small body trembled. She trembled because she remembered precious memories, ones that she must not forget, within those terrible memories she'd tried to erase. Those happy times pushed themselves to the front of her mind.

I decided that I wouldn't cry anymore, and yet.. A single tear slid down her cheek. Then, as if a dam had been broken, her tears immediately gushed out, as if all the things that had accumulated within her were bursting out.

She breathed in once, and it all spilled forth.

"This...b-boy is..." Charlotte sobbed. "A...little...iglet..."

Trying to stop the overflowing tears rolling down, Charlotte rubbed desperately at her eyes.

Seeing her like this, the prodigy started losing his composure. Even someone like Slowe had never come across a girl crying right in front of him like this.

Not only that, but the Great Spirit of Wind was still observing them from somewhere. If he made this girl cry, he didn't know what

kind of retaliation he would receive. "Wait, stop! Sorry! That was all my fault, so please don't cry! I'm begging you! If you cry right now, there's a lot of things that could go wrong!"

Charlotte wailed. "Y-You're the one...who made a mistake, though...!"

"Look here! Oink, oink! I'm pretending to be a piglet! Oiiink, oiiink! Sorry! So please, don't cry!"

Charlotte bawled. "Nooo! You're completely different!!!"

"Oiiink!"

He didn't sound like one at all, and Charlotte thought the boy was absurd.

Charlotte cried a while after that, but suddenly, she felt a gentle wind envelop her. With that, Charlotte realized this. *I'm...still alive.*

Almost as if he was comforting her, a black cat approached Charlotte's feet. He was a very kind kitty, one who had always been with her ever since she'd escaped Huzak.

Charlotte's expression softened, and in contrast, Slowe's face tensed up. He realized that this small living thing was the Great Spirit of Wind themselves. They were the boss of the spirits and currently the overlord of this place.

This was the first time that Slowe had ever met one of the beings known as Great Spirits. On reflex, his whole body went tense.

The cat looked up at Slowe and opened its mouth, meowing. "*Knowing you, you should know what I am asking for, meow.*"

The spirit looked like nothing more than a mere cat. However, Slowe knew he must not be deceived by its appearance. Even now, the eerie creature was pressuring Slowe with killing intent, and they were an existence that was on a scale that humans could not comprehend. Even though they sounded like a cat meowing to Charlotte, Slowe could clearly understand their words.

Slowe's first impression of the Great Spirit was a wounded, giant demon cat.

"I need a human to protect Charlotte in my stead, meow."

There was an invisible tug-of-war of wind between the giant black cat at the young Charlotte's feet and the Prodigy of Wind. Slowe was desperately trying to suppress the storm of power that the Great Spirit was conjuring up.

"I'll hear you out, so please...suppress that murderous intent of yours..." Slowe said slowly.

"Huh?" Charlotte let out, confused. Charlotte, exhausted from all the crying, could only hear one half of the conversation. She had no idea that the Great Spirit of Wind was speaking at all.

Slowe turned to look at Charlotte, who had confusion written all over her face. He smiled, reassuring her that it was nothing of

concern.

“It’s a promise, meow. You will protect Charlotte from now on, Slowe Denning, meow. If you understand what I’m saying, pet the piglet that Charlotte is holding, meow.”

The Great Spirit of Wind had come to the Denning lands because it wanted to see the prodigy that the wind spirits had gossiped about. And provided he measured up to the spirit’s standards, the spirit had planned to ask him to take custody of Charlotte.

When the Great Spirit met the boy in person, the boy greatly surpassed their expectations. Even before the intimidating aura of the Great Spirit of Wind, the boy wasn’t affected. He had great potential. In Huzak, at least, no human had ever measured up to the same caliber as him.

“Okay. As long as you don’t go berserk, I’ll listen to anything you say...” Slowe muttered.

“I’m not going to go berserk! I’m not!” Charlotte wailed.

Slowe tilted his head in question before realizing what he’d done. “Ah, no, I’m not talking about you!”

Charlotte glared at him with her big eyes. But she wasn’t crying anymore, at least. She seemed tired of crying, and she now had a higher priority: the weird boy in front of her who had piqued her curiosity. One moment, he brought the young Charlotte back into the world, but then he started muttering to himself suddenly. It was...curious, she decided.

Just as she was doing that, her stomach growled, and she immediately pressed on her stomach with her hands, embarrassed by the pathetic sound.

“Ah... Uh, this is, well, that...” Charlotte stammered.

It was very heartwarming in contrast to the intimidating aura seeping from the Great Spirit of Wind, and Slowe found the sound so funny that he laughed.

Charlotte groaned with embarrassment.

“Sorry, sorry,” Slowe said, chuckling. “You’re hungry, huh?”

“Yeah... I’m hungry.”

“Then let’s get some nice food to eat together after this.”

Charlotte took a small moment to think about what she should do. Then, she shoved the soft toy she had been hugging into Slowe’s chest. “Yeah. Also, this boy isn’t a puppy.”

“You’re right. I was wrong.” Slowe smiled wryly and gently patted the head of the soft toy.

Though nobody else noticed, that was a sign that he had accepted the promise with the Great Spirit of Wind.

“Slowe Denning. You must protect Charlotte, meow. You need to do all you can so that Charlotte’s real identity doesn’t get out, meow. You must

live only for that purpose, meow."

Slowe's second impression of the Great Spirit was an overprotective parent.

He almost had to admire that the spirit was *such* a doting parent, rather than being taken aback. It was obvious that the Great Spirit of Wind worried a great deal about Charlotte, and Slowe agreed with them that he didn't want this girl to suffer any more than this.

But that wasn't the main reason why he had been able to make such a decision so quickly. He thought that protecting a princess in secret was something like the heroes who showed up in stories would do, and that doing that would be cool.

"Well now, their battle has been over for quite a while now, so let's go back to my house and have some delicious soup or something," Slowe said.

She made a noise as she thought about it, then said, "Yeah, let's. I'm hungry."

"Speaking of which, what's your name?"

The girl hesitated for a long time before a name spilled forth in a voice that was barely a whisper. "Charlotte."

Slowe repeated that name over and over in his head. He had heard that name from the spirits, but hearing it from the girl herself was a completely different experience.

"Charlotte, huh? It seems that we have a long relationship ahead of us... Please take care of me from now on."

"Okay..."

Within the forest on the Denning lands, with the two knights taking control over the slave auction behind them, the two young children met for the first time.

The girl hid her real identity, and the boy pretended that he didn't know anything. Even though the boy knew everything, he accepted the wounded girl and her beast within his fold. He was almost optimistic to a fault, thinking and naively hoping that everything would work out somehow.

The boy's biggest miscalculation, however, was probably the fact that he ended up loving the princess of a destroyed kingdom more than his fiancée, who was coming to visit him the next day.

Chapter 3: The Awakening of the Guardian Dragon

It was dusk, and the sun was nearly hidden below the horizon. And despite being this late, the booms and sounds of extraordinary magic phenomena showed no sign of stopping.

“Damn it! One more time!”

“Ya know, yer wasting yer time trying to enchant a sword without the power of magical ores embedded within it. Just be good and save up money to buy the real deal.”

It was the miraculous power of those who were loved by the spirits. Today, like always, the training field made for spell practice was filled with magic shooting from wands and the clash of sword fighting. It was almost as heated as training grounds where real soldiers practiced their military drills.

The long-awaited dungeon expedition was finally around the corner and would commence next week. Everyone practiced in their own ways so that they could fight as best as they could when they came across monsters in the dungeon. One student was working on controlling their spells. Another was trying to learn new ones, gripping a textbook in their free hand. There were even commoner students, holding swords instead of wands, among the crowd.

For these youths who wished to join the army after graduating from Kirsch, a visit from Duke Denning held more weight than one from Princess Carina. And among them, the princess of a destroyed kingdom and a girl with black hair waved their wands as well.

“Speaking of which, Miss Charlotte. You’ve talked to the princess before, right?” Tina asked.

“Princess Carina? Yeah, I have. But...only just a tiny bit.”

“What is the princess like? I wanted to talk to her, but there’s always that crowd of boys around her...” Tina pouted. “I’ve only seen her from a distance, never up close. Ah, but I was able to tell that the princess was a little disgruntled about it all.”

To Charlotte, the personal retainer of a direct descendant of House Denning, the visit of the duke was also a very big event. It was a sad fact that even though Duke Denning doted on Slowe Denning, she didn’t matter to him at all, despite being Slowe’s retainer. Her absence wouldn’t change a thing in the duke’s eyes. Charlotte wanted to prove

that evaluation wrong, and if possible, she was also hoping to get a raise.

Charlotte thought for a moment. “Hmm, how do I put this? She’s gentle, she’s great at magic, and she’s beautiful too... I guess I’d call her a perfect human? Ah, but Master Slowe said that she was a little similar to you, Tina.”

“The princess and me? Reeally? I don’t think we’re alike at all, though...” Tina was lost in her thoughts for a while. Then, she stared at Charlotte’s chest, and then her own.



“...Um, Tina? Why did you just look at me like that?”

“Ah, no, it’s nothing. I just thought that Lord Denning is quite the closet pervert, that’s all. It can’t be helped, though, since Princess Carina’s are quite big. But wait, the princess often calls Lord Denning to her room... Are they possibly doing the you-know-what up there...?”

“Th-There’s no way that would happen!” Charlotte exclaimed.

Tina laughed. “Miss Charlotte has finally gotten mad!”

“I’m not angry at all! It’s all because you said weird stuff, Tina!”

“Oh *really*? You’ve been in a bad mood for a while, Miss Charlotte. But... I also understand how you feel. Lord Denning was supposed to watch over our spell practice today but he suddenly got summoned by the princess. I had also been a little excited for today too, and yet... However, I think it would be better for us to leave those feelings behind for now and focus more on magic.”

“I *am* focused!”

“But Miss Charlotte, your spells haven’t succeeded in a little while,” Tina pointed out. “You’ve failed five consecutive times.”

“That is...” Charlotte stammered. “That’s just because I’m not feeling that well, that’s all.”

Tina’s words had hit the bull’s-eye.

Lately, Charlotte’s master seemed to have Princess Carina on his mind all the time, and Charlotte would spot them standing very close to each other several times a day as she walked through the campus.

It wasn’t like Slowe was only hers or anything. Even just the thought of that was presumptuous. She had become Slowe’s retainer pretty much out of pity; for her to think of the son of House Denning like that was...

How do I put it? It’s almost as if a boy, whom I was always with, was taken away by a person who appeared out of nowhere, Charlotte thought. In other words, she was feeling a little lonely.

But, well, if Slowe planned on spending all his time with Princess Carina, Charlotte had to make plans of her own. She would practice hard at magic and knock Slowe off his feet with her progress!

“Ah! Now you’re frowning *and* you’ve got wrinkles between your eyebrows, Miss Charlotte!”

“N-No, I don’t! I was just a little gloomy because I was worried whether Master Slowe was really being useful! Being Princess Carina’s companion is his job, after all! Okay, now that’s the end of this conversation! I won’t talk about it anymore, you hear me?!”

“Uh...I was joking, Miss Charlotte. Please don’t be so mad.”

“Hey, you’re being too loud, commoner.” A voice cut into their conversation. “Still, you two seem to be talking about something just a

bit interesting.”

Suddenly, the silhouette of a very noble person appeared. The owner of that shrill voice was a person who didn't usually come to the training field.

The arrival of the small Queen of Kirsch Mage Institute, Alicia Bulla Dia Cirquista, caused whispers to break out all over the field. It was very rare for the noble Cirquistan princess to come to this place at all. Rumors said that there was a small room on the top floor of the female dorms where one could practice magic, so they speculated that its existence was why she wasn't usually present.

“Lady Alicia!” Charlotte exclaimed. “May I ask what you are doing here?”

“Miss Charlotte, I would like to ask you something. May I have some of your time? Wait, why are you holding a wand? Didn't the duke ban you from having one, if I remember correctly?”

“Ah, this is, um... I was granted temporary permission, well, kind of, and...” Charlotte mumbled.

“Oh really? Well, that has nothing to do with me, though,” Alicia replied.

The red-haired boy who was normally next to Alicia was absent. It was quite a rare thing for the domineering princess to go somewhere without a servant. However, Alicia didn't seem to have even one bit of intent to practice magic.

Why was she here?

“Oh, Lady Alicia, long time no see! Well then, some of my friends over there are calling for me, Miss Charlotte, so I'll head over there for a bit!” Tina was always quick-witted and the first to move. She also excelled at noticing the slightest change in people's feelings.

Immediately sensing the bad mood Alicia was in, Tina made a run for it. She didn't want to be caught up in the cross fire. Better to be safe than sorry, as they say. After all, she was a commoner, and on the bottom of the hierarchy in this school, so issues between nobles were out of her wheelhouse.

“She's a restless commoner as usual,” Alicia noted. “That aside, Miss Charlotte, that guy... What does that guy usually...talk to the Little Daryth about?”

“Huh? Are you talking about Master Slowe?”

“Who else could I be talking about?”

“Um, well... I don't know much about that myself,” Charlotte admitted.

“You don't know? Aren't you his personal retainer, Miss Charlotte?”

“I *am* assigned to him...”

“If you're specifically assigned to him, then why don't you know?”

“Even if you say that, I can’t really...” Charlotte, of course, was also curious about what Slowe and Princess Carina talked about. However, she couldn’t just interrogate her master about every single little detail of his private life.

Not only that, but this was the future queen and the former prodigy of Denning they were talking about! They probably were discussing the future of this country or something, topics that Charlotte wouldn’t understand. As proof of that, Slowe sometimes came back looking exhausted when the princess wouldn’t leave her room. Charlotte had a rough guess of what was going on; surely, they had debates about difficult topics in that room.

“Listen, Miss Charlotte. You are his personal retainer. Personal retainers of House Denning are totally different from normal retainers. You understand that, right?”

“Um... Yes, I know that, but...”

A personal retainer of House Denning was a servant whose life and death was intertwined with their master’s. They would always wait by their master’s side, understand the dilemmas their master was in, and wield their power together with their master on the battlefield.

In other words, a personal retainer of House Denning was a human with a very special station, whom even soldiers would acknowledge with respect.

“If you know that, then I don’t have to waste my breath. Go investigate and probe into what they are talking about!” Alicia ordered.

“I-I can’t! I can’t navigate conversations skillfully enough to do something like probing!”

“You *can*! You’re that guy’s personal retainer, right?!”

Charlotte said that it was an impossible feat, but Alicia also didn’t budge. *Why is Lady Alicia angry at me?* Charlotte pondered this question as Alicia forced her to promise that she would report any information she found out about the two after this.



“The princess looked at *me* and smiled!” a boy exclaimed.

“No! *Me*! She saw the funny face I was making and was smiling at me!” another boy argued.

For the past few days, Charlotte had kept asking me what Princess Carina and I talked about alone. Charlotte was probably worried about whether I was really able to successfully carry out the grand duty of being the princess’s companion or not. She spent a lot of time on this, even though she was supposed to be busy with spell practice. Charlotte was a retainer who was kind to her very core.

“Um! Uh! Please shake my hand!” a student stammered.

Still, Princess Carina's popularity is really off the charts, huh? There was one guy who had described Princess Carina as an angel who had descended onto the campus from the heavens. Honestly? He might not have been too far off. After all, people who had the same classes as her would dance wildly out of elation just from that fact, and they would do weird stuff in class in an attempt to make her remember their faces. Even during the brief periods of time when she was moving between classrooms, crowds of people would gather just for a glimpse of the beautiful princess.

However, those idiots... *Excuse me.* I mean, those guys didn't know one very important fact about her. Once she stepped out of her room, Princess Carina would put on the act of a graceful and perfect angel. If one observed her *veery* carefully, however, they could tell what she was feeling from the subtle changes in her expression.

"Mounds— Your Highness! Ah, I mean, Princess Carina! Won't you look my way?!" a boy yelled.

"Hey, *you!* What did you just say to the princess?!" a girl squealed in indignation.

"I didn't say anything! If I had to explain it, well, it's my inner voice!"

Take what just happened, for example. The princess heard someone call out to her with a disgraceful name, but she still kept up her pleasant front, saying, "No, it is fine... Aha ha... Everyone is as energetic as always today, I see..."

But if you looked closely, her shaking hands were clenched into fists.

When asked for a handshake, she didn't show any negative reaction and only smiled quietly. However, her large eyes were slightly narrowed, and her forehead twitched. *Oh no. That's reeeal bad. Princess Carina looks pissed off. Her face is also getting red.*

The male student from earlier piped up again. "Whoa, up close, those are some great b— W-Whoa! Why is Sir Dalton here?! A-Ahhh!!!!!!!!!!!"

Meanwhile, the princess fiddled with her rose-gold hair, twirling it around her fingers as she looked up towards the sky with melancholy on her face. *Ah, here it comes.* Her gaze wasn't aimed at the clouds drifting by in the sky—she was looking at *me*. With a slightly reddened face, Princess Carina glared hard at me, who had been watching over her with gentle eyes from within the school building.

She was basically saying to me, "I can't do anything about *that*, so do something about these troublesome people with that thing you do! Hurry up!"

Thus, I threw the windows wide open and glared at the surrounding people. Sometimes, when people didn't notice me there, I

would cast spells from my spot in the classroom and mess up somebody's hairstyle or something. This time, they noticed me without the need for me to do anything else. They started to panic and made a ruckus about how the Piggy Duke's mood was getting bad.

Thanks to the commotion, Princess Carina was able to scuttle out of the area quickly.

"Hey, the Piggy Duke's at it again, bullying people getting close to the princess."

"He isn't satisfied with just keeping people away from his retainer... He intends to even make the princess his own girl now, huh? Just because he's from House Denning, he thinks he can do anything he wants," the student spat before noticing me. "Ah, i-it's nothing, Lord Denning!"

I didn't reply.

With this, my reputation had worsened again. Not only that, but whenever Princess Carina sent out an SOS signal more than once in a day, the next day was a given.

"Slowe Denning. A job for you."

Princess Carina would, without fail, clam up in her room. In other words, she was skipping classes, and I would go to her room again under the request of the Royal Knights. Lately, this had become a set routine in my everyday life.

"Lord Denning came here today again. Look at that face of his," one girl muttered with distaste.

"Huh? He looks serious to me."

"How? You don't know what kind of disgusting desires he's hiding under his face. Maybe he's purposefully bullying the princess because he wants to come into the female dorms..."

Hearing someone whisper that, I felt my whole body jump. *Huuuh?! I was indignant. H-How dare you say that, you damned people! It's the opposite, you hear me?! It's the complete opposite! Hey, my reputation had finally recovered into a relatively good one! Having it crash into the ground again because of something like this is out of the question!*

"Yikes, he's looking this way. Was that rumor really true?"

"He looks like he wants to say something. Hmph, I wonder what kind of lewd things he's thinking," the girl mocked.

I'm not thinking about such things at all, I protested inwardly. Hey, you guys might not know this, but Princess Carina has the tendencies of a hermit! She has a heart of glass, and she's a person who immediately holes up in her room whenever the slightest troublesome thing happens!

I wanted to shout this out loud into the world. However, if I thoughtlessly told the truth, I would be killed by the Royal Knights

next to me.

“What are you looking around for? Follow me, Slowe Denning,” Sir Dalton barked.

I sighed. “Ugh, I’m so unlucky.”

“Being invited into the private quarters of the princess herself is the epitome of honor.” The knight cocked an eyebrow.

“That’s not what I’m arguing about!” I retorted.

Today, just like every other day, I headed to the princess’s room on the top floor of the female dorms.

I entered the bedroom and was greeted by the scent of refreshing perfume and the sight of Princess Carina sprawled out on the bed. Princess Carina wore her light pink pajamas once again today. *Maybe they’re her favorites?* She didn’t seem to have the motivation to do anything today either. Her current slacking-off phase had continued for two consecutive days.

“You were not at our meeting place at our usual time, Princess Carina, so I came here, only to find you being a hermit again... Please know that even entering the female dorms is a difficult task for me,” I said.

“Th-That’s not it... I’m actually feeling sick today, and that’s why I’m here...” she stammered.

“Someone feeling sick would not take so many snacks into her bedroom,” I said slowly.

Everyone imagined her to be the resident of some kind of paradise, and probably nobody could imagine in their wildest dreams that the princess was actually such a sloppy girl. She wasn’t all that prim and proper, and her eating habits were not very regular.

“Those greedy eyes of yours...” she muttered. “Fine, I get it. Here, I’ll give you your share.”

“No! Please do not randomly assume what I am thinking! And I said that I was in the middle of a diet, did I not?”

“Really? Are you *really* not forcing yourself? An extreme diet is bad for your body. Plus, I don’t think you’re a shockingly obese boy like the rumors said you would be, to be honest. If we’re talking about your current measurements, then there’s probably at least five people of your size in town right now.”

“What you’re seeing is the result of a successful diet. I have actually lost a lot of weight already.”

“Oh, really? I wish I’d seen you back before you lost all that weight,” Princess Carina said as she munched greedily on the snacks on the bed.

It seemed that she was the type who tended to overeat to deal with stress. When she finished eating, she hid herself under the sheets

again.

I heaved a long sigh. Those guys who called Princess Carina “an angel from the heavens” probably would never believe their eyes if they saw her like this. The princess showed me such a frank side of herself without a care. *I wonder what kind of position she ranks me in her heart... Nowhere good, I bet.*

“Come on, please come out, Princess Carina. If you come out now, we will make it in time for classes at noon. So, please get changed. You are still in your pajamas, right?”

“I don’t want to, Slowe...” she whined. “I made up my mind that I am not going to go outside at all today. I won’t get changed.”

I had thought about why she’d made me join the Guardian Selection, and why she’d chosen me to be her companion while she was at school. On top of that, she also demanded that I call her by her name, without her title, when it was just the two of us. Of course, I firmly declined that order, but... Why in the world was she so intimate with me, and only me? Why did Princess Carina trust me so much?

There, I came to a theory. Surely, she felt a sort of camaraderie with me since we were both treated as giant problem children of this country.

“If you don’t come out, Princess Carina, your knights will give me an earful.”

“We already know that the dragon hatchling is no longer in the dungeon, so there isn’t any reason for me to be in Kirsch, and yet...” The princess groaned in frustration. “‘Become more familiar with others,’ you say?! That old geezer Maldini.” She cursed at him.

The princess poked her head out from under the sheets, looking disgruntled. From the bottom of her heart, she thought that the position of princess being imposed on her was troublesome.

That was probably why she’d chosen me. The most widely circulated public rumor was that the Piggy Duke had been crushed by the weight of House Denning and gone mad. Princess Carina probably had been jealous of me, who lived my life as I pleased.

My infamy as the blackhearted Piggy Duke had spread far and wide, even into other countries, so surely Princess Carina had heard about it too. Thus, she’d chosen me because she wanted someone whom she could dump all of her inner complaints on.

“Making such a sad face is of no use. I won’t be deceived by that,” I declared.

The princess pouted. “Fine, I get it...”

Maybe she had finally relented. She started squirming out of her bedsheets, and...

“Wha—” I choked.

What the hell did I just see? For a moment, I thought I saw Princess

Carina naked. But not quite: she had her underwear on. However, that was all she wore. *How...how do I put this? Most of what I saw was bare, exposed skin.* While I rubbed at my eyes in disbelief, Princess Carina seemed to have noticed her immodest getup and she let out a small, cute squeal. She hid her body with her sheets immediately. She had absolutely no dignity at that moment.

“Whoa! D-Did you see that?! I...I’ll make you pay money for that, you know!”

The bewitching sight of her body had been suddenly revealed to me. *W-Wait. Wasn’t she wearing pajamas before? Her chest jiggled just now, right? Her white thighs, her belly button...* And of course, my eyes had been glued to the two mounds that could be distinguished even from above her clothes, when she did have clothes on.

“I-I cannot be held accountable for what just happened!” I exclaimed. “More importantly, why aren’t you wearing clothes?!”

“W-Well, that’s because I’m the type who likes to just be in my u-underwear in bed!”

“Nobody cares which type you are! *Please*, just put on something, quickly!” I hurriedly turned my back on her.

Though the princess didn’t usually have strong bursts of emotion, she seemed embarrassed by the whole thing, and her cheeks had grown rosy. I heard that portraits of Princess Carina were currently being sold for silver coins in Kirsch right now, but the sight of the princess earlier would probably be worth at least one gold. I’d never even once had such a, well, lucky situation with Charlotte up until now, though we had been together for a long time...

Still, what she had below her clothes was more magnificent than what I could have imagined. Speaking of which, that’s right. I had been waiting for this kind of protagonist event. I never really wanted the mercenary or the Traitor Knight.

I tried my hardest to ignore the shuffling behind me. Princess Carina was currently changing her clothes. Though she probably didn’t take too long, it felt like an eternity to me.

“More importantly. You’re going to classes properly today too, Slowe. I heard that you had been a wild child who went berserk all the time and that your attitude in class had been horrid, but...”

“I have stopped being the opposite of serious.”

“What a waste. This is the only time you could spend your time as you please... Ugh, this is too tight.”

“Even in the past, Princess Carina, I had never skipped classes. Now, please hurry up and get changed.” I hesitated. “Also, I do not know what is too tight, but I shall wait downstairs.”

“Ah. Wait a minute, Slowe.”

Cautiously, I waited before speaking up. "What is it?"

"It's a little difficult... Hey, can you help me get changed?"

"I'll be waiting for you downstairs!" I exclaimed hastily.

The princess chuckled. "Okaaay."

Damn it! I cursed inwardly. Now that I think about it calmly, I should have taken more time to burn the sight of her into my mind!

Sir Dalton, who had been waiting at the entrance of the bedroom, seemed to have deduced what had happened inside from overhearing our conversation. He gave me a big, approving nod, praising me for a job well done.

Like our earlier interactions had shown, the princess thought of me as her comrade. She felt that I was the same type of person as her. She, as a princess who didn't want to become something like a queen, and I, who'd fallen from the Prodigy of Wind and lived a carefree life now.

If she'd sought out a comrade whom she could show her true self to, then I decided to try to carry out that role. As the Prodigy of Wind, I had carried the expectation of becoming Duke Denning on my back, and I understood how she felt more than anyone else, wanting to run away from such a weight.

That was why, even if it was just for a short while... I hoped that she could lead the life of a normal student while she was at Kirsch, at least.

"Huh? Charlotte, your gaze is more fierce than normal. Did something happen? Huh? What? 'What did I talk about with Princess Carina last night?'" I echoed her question. "I mean, we didn't talk about anything significant, but..."

Since the dungeon expedition was complete, Princess Carina had wanted to return to Yoram where the Order was staying. However, the Cardinal had decided to extend her stay at Kirsch since this was a rare opportunity.

Still, whoever invented the saying "time flies" was very accurate. The time I spent with Princess Carina flew by very quickly. I was fortunate enough to continue my assignment as Princess Carina's toy for passing the time, and I brought the princess, who was oozing with dissatisfaction, to all kinds of interesting places within the campus.

"Huh? Oh, you want to know what I am doing, as my retainer? Well... If I had to put it into words, I think I mainly listened to Princess Carina's complaints yesterday. You know, being the princess of Daryth and all, she seems to be tied down by all kinds of duties. Uh, Charlotte? I don't think it's a topic important enough to take notes on..."

Most of these outings took place early in the morning, when most students were still asleep. Instead of doing my daily weight-loss routines, I used that block of time for Princess Carina's sake. We did all kinds of things: feeding the horses, telling her the names of flowers, strolling in nature to the chirping of birds... Sometimes, Charlotte would join us and she would sneak food for Princess Carina from the dining hall kitchens.

What seemed like normal everyday activities to me were all quite novel to the princess, apparently, and she said that time spent with us was more fun than class. But in my mind, it felt as if she was only hanging out with me, so it was hard to say whether she was truly interacting with her peers in the way the Cardinal wished her to.

"Hurry, Slowe!" the princess exclaimed.

"I am heading there right now, so please wait for a moment!" I replied.

A horse-drawn carriage came to a stop below the main gates, and the grand farewell event for the princess was finally over.

The sun had nearly set below the horizon, and there were Royal Knights on white horses around the horse-drawn carriage. Beyond the gate, a large crowd of onlookers bemoaned the departure of the angel. In that case, I was probably a very lucky guy, since I was able to attend to the princess until the very last moment.

"I'm heading out, Charlotte. Once I finish seeing Princess Carina off, I'll return to school. When I do that, though, you must hand over that wand to me," I said.

Charlotte was staying behind at Kirsch. Her time limit for using the wand was until tomorrow morning when my father would arrive. However, I didn't want him to find out about it in the worst-case scenario, so I would take hold of the wand tonight.

I hesitated before continuing, "And...sorry. I was supposed to watch your spellcasting today, but..."

"No! Please don't worry about it, Master Slowe! I'm fine, even just by myself!"

Lately, Charlotte had been using every moment of her free time to practice magic. She might even have been waking up earlier than me, who woke up quite early for the princess's sake. Charlotte seemed determined to practice with her wand until the last second she had.

However, she wasn't the only one using every precious second to work hard. The big dungeon expedition event held by the army was coming up tomorrow. There were many students who had headed to the training field to practice for that sake instead of coming to see Princess Carina off.

"I'll be going, then. Best of luck at your spell practice," I said.

“Okay! Have a safe trip, Master Slowe!” Charlotte trailed off when I didn’t respond. “Master Slowe?”

“Ah, nah. It’s nothing. I’ll come back soon.”

Among the students who were seeing us off, I spotted Alicia, and she had a worried look on her face. For some reason, her expression wouldn’t leave my mind.



After the grand ceremony, Charlotte headed to the training field where there was a bigger ruckus than normal.

“Finally! It’s tomorrow! The time I spent with the princess was like a dream come true, but nothing beats a dungeon!” Shuya exclaimed.

“‘With the princess,’ you say? The only person who can say that is the Piggy Duke, Shuya,” his friend retorted.

The dungeon expedition, long awaited by many, was slated for tomorrow. Perhaps because Duke Denning and a few other highly influential nobles were visiting, even the soldiers were oddly restless, and the whole campus was buzzing with excitement over the extraordinary event.

However, Charlotte was the only one who knew that Duke Denning’s first priority wasn’t the dungeon. He was here to see Slowe, and she knew that for a fact.

“I’ve finally found you, Miss Charlotte! What happened to your report today?” Alicia exclaimed.

“Oh! Lady Alicia, I’m very sorry, it slipped my mind. Let’s see...” Charlotte reported that her master had been hearing out the princess’s woes like usual.

“Oh, really. Well, I supposed that was the case. After all, she’s *that* Little Daryth,” Alicia replied and nodded with hidden meaning that Charlotte could not decipher. Alicia then disappeared from the training field.

From there on, everything was as usual again. Finding an appropriate opening, Tina met up with Charlotte and the two started practicing spells together.

“Miss Charlotte, Lady Alicia seemed somewhat in a good mood today,” Tina commented. “This is just my opinion, but she’s probably happy that Princess Carina is going back. With this, Lord Denning won’t have to be summoned by her anymore. Ah, in that case, she might be the same as you, Miss Charlotte.”

Charlotte had to take a moment before she could reply. “So?! Master Slowe is just doing his job, and I don’t have any opinion on it all!”

Tina continued her fun, lighthearted banter with Charlotte for a

while after that as she waved her wand. With that, two mini golems fought each other with their fists, taking out chunks of each other's earthen bodies.

"Hey, look at *that*. That girl's the commoner from the rumors," a student muttered.

"She's controlling the golems subconsciously. Sometimes, people like her just appear out of nowhere... I'm so glad I wasn't in the same year as her."

Charlotte wasn't the only one watching Tina. The noble students in the training field were staring at her too. Though she was a commoner, the girl's skill had improved by leaps and bounds. At this rate, she might even surpass them. With this anxiety in their hearts, the noble students began to practice their spells once again.

Tina, who had only recently awakened her earth magic, was already at a level where she could make two mini mud golems fight each other while humming a tune. When she gained the skill to control three mini golems at once, she could finally take on the challenge of manipulating a bronze golem.

The bronze golem spell was significant. Being able to control one meant that she could properly call herself an earth mage.

"You're amazing, Tina. The speed that you're improving at magic is..." Charlotte searched for an appropriate word. "Well, you're going off with a whoosh."

"In my case, my abilities just happened to overlap with what I wanted to do, I guess... But your spell earlier was also amazing, Miss Charlotte!"

"My pebble spell? Not at all."

Tina nearly choked on her words. "Please don't be so self-deprecating, Miss Charlotte. Being a light mage in Daryth is a big deal, so please have more confidence in yourself!"

"I mean, you're definitely more amazing than me, Tina." Charlotte pouted. "Your spells are more useful than mine, after all. The only thing I can do is stop the movement of a small pebble, you know?" Charlotte heaved a heavy sigh.

Even though she was a light mage, Charlotte's lack of skill meant her spell didn't work at all on Tina's mini golems. Charlotte groaned in frustration at another failed attempt. "Jeez!"

Whenever she failed at using her spell, Charlotte could feel how talented Tina was. This younger girl steadily improved her skills every single day without fail. Tina had said that she was jealous of Charlotte for being able to talk with the princess, but in Charlotte's eyes, Tina was much more impressive, as she was talented at manipulating magic. In fact, Charlotte was very, *very* jealous of Tina!

"Ah, speaking of which, may I talk to you about one thing?" Tina

asked.

“What is it?” Charlotte prompted.

“I know it’s late for me to say this, but... I’m considering joining the dungeon expedition tomorrow.”

“Huh?! You were interested in the dungeon, Tina? Are you hoping to join the army?!”

“I don’t really have any grand dreams of entering the army or anything after I graduate, but I’m curious about how effective my spells would be against monsters...” Tina said sheepishly.

“Really?! It’s dangerous! Monsters aren’t all silly and stupid like those orcs that end up coming onto the campus, you know.”

“Well, I mean, I know that, but... This is a rare opportunity where we can go down a dungeon with guards all around us. I hear that inexperienced adventurers commonly pay money to hire guards when they first enter a dungeon, so... Ah, but I’m not thinking about going deep down, though! I mean, I just want to test the waters in the top layers! So, about that. Miss Charlotte, you went down the dungeon a while ago with Lord Denning and Princess Carina, right? How was it? Was it scary?”

“When I went down? Weeell... I was...” Charlotte trailed off.

Charlotte thought back on her dungeon expedition and how she had panicked in front of the monsters, almost losing it completely. Her heart sank deep in her chest like a heavy anchor dropped into the harbor. *I’m pathetic. How pathetic. Why am I so pathetic?* she thought as her spirits sank further. Looking back, even Princess Carina had started chuckling at Charlotte. Reflecting on it all, Charlotte thought, *Why am I so... Why do I always fail at the most important times?* She began to reflect on every single mistake she’d made in there.

“Ah, you don’t have to force yourself to tell me, though!”

Charlotte tilted her head in question. “Why?”

“You probably messed up in the dungeon, right? You’re easy to read, Miss Charlotte.”

Charlotte was speechless for a moment. “No way! Am I that obvious?”

“Yes, very. I’ll be frank. Whenever I’m with you, Miss Charlotte, I never get bored.”

“I think that’s going a bit too far,” Charlotte said slowly.

An internal struggle started up once again in Charlotte’s mind. Seeing her like that, Tina couldn’t help but find Charlotte as cute as she often did. Though Charlotte was a far cry from the typical workers of House Denning, there would be very few people who complimented her slightly absentminded Denning master as much as she did.

“Oh, come on. How long are you going to mope, Miss Charlotte?”

Watching the still-pouting Charlotte out of the corner of her eye,

Tina resumed her practice.

Though Tina had ended up asking Charlotte about something else, her words from earlier were the truth. Tina was honestly just curious about how effective her talents would be against monsters.

Charlotte returned to her room and heaved a big sigh. “I wonder whyyy... Why is Tina so good at magiic?” she whined with exasperation.

Charlotte trained hard at magic with Tina, and she couldn’t forget how much Tina improved every single day. Watching Tina’s visible progress, Charlotte repeatedly wondered to herself whether she herself was making any. Not only that, but Tina seemed to have the interest of the teacher with the puffy, shaggy hair, and he would give her advice from time to time.

Charlotte probably looked at the two with a lot of longing in her eyes. Despite her not being a student, the puffy-haired teacher talked to Charlotte, asking, “Ah, you’re Dennin’s retainer, huh? What, are you practicin’ magic too?” He’d started to warmly give advice to Charlotte as well.

After he learned that Charlotte had an affinity for light magic, he’d told Charlotte that the light and dark elements were quite special among the Six Greater Magics. Dark magic lent its powers to people with trauma in their hearts, while the way someone carries themselves was important to mastering light magic.

Apparently this professor also had an affinity for light magic, but he hadn’t been able to fully realize his talent in it. The professor told her many anecdotes and he’d said that the reason why the light spirits ignored him was probably due to the weakness of his own heart.

“Will I be a failure forever like this? I don’t want that...” Charlotte mumbled.

Every night, Charlotte would be depressed as she compared herself to the talented Tina, and she would be filled with frustration at herself. Not only that, but Tina had found out about Charlotte’s *real* ability in magic and trod lightly around the topic for Charlotte’s sake. This fact made Charlotte’s heart plummet, feeling pathetic and sad at the same time.

Charlotte had been a mage for nearly ten years, and she had finally started finding success at spells against mere pebbles. Of course, even if she was only effective against pebbles, she had been delighted. However, if she stopped making further progress, everything would be meaningless.

“I want to become good at magiic.” Charlotte whined to herself. She buried her head in her pillow with a poof, and she started waving her arms and legs back and forth.

Her real feelings were all out in the open, but she didn't mind that. Though her room was so small that it couldn't be measured against the princess's room she had seen a while ago, this was still her own space. It was a place that she'd managed to obtain because she came to Kirsch Mage Institute.

"The way someone carries themselves... Is it maybe because I'm still lying?"

Even now, she continued to deceive everyone around her. "Charlotte" was only part of her real name, and she'd become a retainer by taking advantage of the kindness of the people of House Denning.

Who would believe me if I said that I was the princess of Huzak after all this time? she thought. It might have been different back then in the past, but many years had passed since then.

Not only that, but if word of her real identity got out, she would become the catalyst for countries to start trying to seize Huzak back from the monsters. That meant war. People of House Denning would be the ones commanding the army. They might be injured on the battlefield, and someone might even die.

Charlotte went silent at that. The duke, the duchess, Master Slowe's siblings... They were all strict, but there was always kindness in their strictness. She didn't know what the people of House Denning thought, but to Charlotte, House Denning was full of irreplaceable, precious people. Charlotte didn't want to cause trouble to the people to whom she owed a lot due to something she did out of self-satisfaction.

"Meeow."

"Are you trying to cheer me up?"

The cat then purred with a slightly distorted voice.

Charlotte chuckled. "What a strange sound. It's like one of Master Slowe's orc sounds."

This black cat had followed her when she escaped Huzak. Even after Charlotte was all by herself after splitting off with everyone on the way, this little comrade had been with her the whole time. At this point, the cat was almost family to her.

Charlotte did think that the cat had quite a longer lifespan than usual, but calling it a demon cat was going too far. Up until now, Charlotte had witnessed her master talking to this black cat countless times. Whenever he did, Charlotte was a little surprised, thinking that her master had pent-up stress like she did, but...treating her kitty like a demon cat was mean.

Charlotte decided that she would tell him that outright the next time she saw him talking to her cat.

"All right. That's the end of my sad time!"

She stood back up. A breath of fresh air was necessary when she was in a miserable mood like this. And for Charlotte, cleaning her room was exactly that. However, she had only just cleaned her room yesterday. Instead, she thought about throwing out things she didn't need.

In the middle of doing that, she found a certain item from the bag she had taken to Yoram.

"Oh, this perfume is... It's the family heirloom of the marquess house, and..." Charlotte gasped, slightly panicked. "I need to treat it with care!"

Charlotte took the perfume bottle into her hands and stared hard at it. It was a precious gift she'd received from a person who had listened to Charlotte's resolve patiently back in Yoram, and then encouraged her forward.

Charlotte couldn't decide whether he was truly a bad person or not. Not only that, her master had also said that Sepith wasn't a bad guy.

"If only he had even just one friend he could confide everything in, he probably wouldn't have done such a thing. But Sepith is a person who can get back up again. That's why the Cardinal is putting all his efforts into covering up the incident Sepith caused." There, her master had paused. *"And well, this is just my opinion, but... The queen would surely take his complicated situation into consideration."*

Sepith had schemed to do evil things and conferred with the empire, and yet her master had declared with confidence that Sepith would pick himself back up again from this incident. Charlotte couldn't decipher what her master's thoughts were.

However, if he was going to say that, then Charlotte thought she would put her faith in Sepith too.

"If I remember right, he said that this perfume would declare my resolve to a dragon, right?"

Charlotte dragged out the monster encyclopedia she had received from Slowe and opened the page on dragons. The page was dog-eared; she didn't know how many times she'd read this page of anecdotes on Sekhmet. It was the guardian deity of Huzak that had defeated monsters trying to invade Huzak from the north countless times.

However, Sekhmet was surely already dead. *Back then...the Guardian Dragon didn't appear when Huzak was attacked by monsters.* As a result of that, Charlotte's homeland was in ruins, and she was now a citizen of Daryth.

She would probably have to keep her secret in her heart for the rest of her life. Perhaps one day, like Sepith, she might also end up pushing on and rushing forward based on only her own feelings. If

there was at least one person who knew her true self, would that fact bring relief to her heart? Like how her master had said Sepith's fate could have changed if there was someone he could confide his deepest secrets to?

She thought about who that person would be in her own case, and...

It's obvious. There was only one person who was on her side without fail, even though Charlotte was just a clumsy girl who couldn't use magic properly.

"Ah. That's why." Charlotte realized the reason why Princess Carina had trusted her master so much. The reason why the princess had relied on him and summoned him for the smallest reasons she could find was...

"She's probably a person who gets lonely easily, just like me."

Sepith Pendragon had said that he'd made a vow to this perfume. That he had thrown away everything and abandoned his life as a commoner to live on as a noble.

Charlotte was envious of his strength. His ability to make such a hard decision. After all, she'd also longed to gain such strength all this time.

She had always waited for a time when she would have the courage to confess her secret.

Charlotte took a sharp breath. She took the perfume bottle into her hands, and she stood up. Opening the windows, she looked outside. Unlike the rooms of her master and the princess, the view wasn't good from here. *But I think it's very fitting for my current self, so it's better this way.*

Voices flowed in from outside.

"Hey guys! I hear that the princess is going to sit in on one of Shuya's divination sessions!"

"You what?! That fake is going to sink his teeth into her?! We need to stop this at once!" a boy shouted in return.

Now then, what vow should I make to this perfume? Do I wish to become better at magic? Do I pray that I improve as a retainer?

...No. If I did that, I would be doing the same thing as I always have.

"Sir Sepith wouldn't have made a wish to become better at magic either..."

Very soon, the duke would be paying a visit to this school. Her future would probably be decided then. Maybe, since she was useless, unlike her master, she might be deemed a failure as a retainer and be separated from him. It was a sad thought, but that future was very possible.

However, if they were to be separated the way they were now, Charlotte knew in her gut that she would end up hating herself. She mustn't let it end while she was still deceiving him.

That was why, the vow she made to the perfume was...

"...Just one person," she muttered. "I pray that I will be able to tell the truth to Master Slowe alone."

With this, the girl who'd inherited the blood of Huzak's royal family, the Royal White Lilies, declared her resolution to something she could not see with her eyes.

The personal retainer of Slowe Denning, the third son of Duke Denning, sprinkled the bottle's contents into the air. The Pendragon perfume...a treasured item that could summon a dragon.

The perfume's fragrance wafted into her nose. It was a smell she had never encountered before.

Her heart was light, and her mind was clear. She didn't know why she had been so hesitant up until now. There was no way for her to know it, but this was an effect of the fragrant potion brewed by House Pendragon; it encouraged the resolution of the user. She almost felt as if she was a whole new person, and she had the feeling that her spells would succeed with the way she was now.

The moment she took hold of her wand, however, the incident occurred.

The ground shook.

"Wh-What?! An earthquake?!"

Her long-lived pet growled in her room. He was the only one that immediately realized that something was not right.



The trembling of earth was the specific side effect of the destruction of a dungeon core.

"*Yahooo!!!!!!!!!!!!!!*" A monster yelled in triumph in the heart of the nameless dungeon spawned in the Lost Woods, a vast plot of nature surrounding Kirsch Mage Institute. "*I cleared it! I reached the heart of the dungeon!*"

This monster had admired Hannibal, who'd come to be known as the Demon Lord of the South due to their accomplishments: constructing the Great Dungeon in Cirquista and creating a paradise for monsters.

Wanting to follow in the footsteps of such a great monster, it had come all the way here from the north so that it could also absorb the power of a dungeon core.

It had searched for the dungeon for many days and it had finally

found the place. It had then stealthily searched all over for an entrance that the soldiers with foreign clothing hadn't discovered yet. Finding success, it had then managed to arrive at the heart of the dungeon before the humans.

The moment it laid its eyes on the untouched dungeon core, it felt a rush of joy that couldn't be put into words.

"Do you see me now, you idiots?! I've done it! I've absorbed a dungeon core at last! And with this...I have also obtained my own army, just for Yours Truly!"

With that, the monster absorbed the dungeon core into its own body. At that very moment, it felt as if its brain was being rattled, and its body heated up like it was boiling over from the inside. Steam poured out of the monster's body, and it spasmed, clutching its chest. A strong pulse shook its large body, and its muscles doubled in size. They strained against its skin, and taut, strong muscles suddenly bulged out.

The monster was overflowing with power.

"The legends were right! Like they said, the dungeon cores are a source of power for us monsters!"

The dungeon core was an extraordinary thing that created underground dungeons and spawned monsters. Humans and monsters vied for control over this source of miracles.

"I won't lose with this! I will never, ever lose again to the adventurers, to those guys from Dustour! But before that! Those damned humans... How dare they all raze as they please! But I'm not interested only in strengthening the dungeon core for my foreseeable future like Hannibal. So, I'm heading outside!"

With the power it had now, it might even be able to go toe to toe with the general of the Northern Monster Legion. Having gained a great self-confidence, the monster that was now a dungeon master took its first step towards the surface.

The dungeon sensed its own destruction and the confused monsters inside started fighting amongst themselves. The dungeon was fated to slowly self-destruct since its dungeon master had decided to go outside.

"Aren't you all frustrated about being walked all over by humans all one-sidedly?! I won't do something boring and silly like holing up in a dungeon and amassing power!" it declared.

The cyclops was now a walking dungeon itself. Hearing its fiery speech, the monsters that had spawned in this place also hardened their resolve.

The Lost Woods was a dense sea of trees located in the southeast of Daryth. The light of the sun could not penetrate the many

overlapping layers of leaves and branches of the tall and flourishing trees here and it was dark inside. This place was home to gentle animals and docile monsters, and usually, big commotions would not happen here. The peace and order of the forest was rarely ever breached.

However, that was not the case right now. The roaring of crazed monsters echoed throughout the sea of trees, and there was a commotion at the entrance of the dungeon.

“What is all this noise about?!”

A ridiculously large number of monsters poured out from a dark entrance. Most of these monsters had gone berserk and they attacked the soldiers there in their frenzy. There was no way the soldiers could have dealt with the great force of them all.

“Report this to the headmaster and call for Sir Highland!” one barked. “This isn’t something we can deal with, not at all!”



The fragrance of the Pendragon perfume floated far, far away, drifting past the forest and traveling across mountains.

Nothing could stop Sepith Pendragon’s perfume, which had lured out a sleeping dragon from the heart of the dungeon in *Shuya Marionette*. It dissolved in the rain and was carried away by the wind, spreading boundlessly across the land.

In this way, the perfume reached the nose of a certain monster who had practically been lost in a sea of chaos. Its memories were vague, and its own sense of self was unstable. In all honesty, it was practically dead. It didn’t know whether it was in this state because it had slumbered for too long, or because of age. The line between life and death had blurred, and the monster itself thought that it was long dead, but...

Within this limbo between life and death, it smelled a nostalgic fragrance.

Its body was heavy and it was nearly blind by now, but that didn’t matter. Almost as if it had been summoned by the scent during its slumber, the black dragon Sekhmet stretched out its wings, which hadn’t moved for the past hundred years.

There was only one thought in its mind as its thundering roar pierced the heavens. *Just one more time. In my last moments, I want to meet the person who takes after you, just once...*

Chapter 4: Horde Invasion

I was incredibly moved. *Horse-drawn carriage rides are normally quite rocky, right? They're supposed to shake when the wheels kick up rocks or can suddenly jolt if a lacking coachman is on the job.*

The forest road was a lifeline that connected Kirsch and Yoram. Though it was maintained well, there were still some less even parts of the road. So what in the world was going on? The carriage in which Princess Carina and I were riding did not shake *at all*.

Princess Carina reacted to my awe with an absurd question of her own. "Carriages shake?"

We were sitting next to each other and her rose-gold hair had been tickling my cheek for a while. I also couldn't help but be distracted by that pleasant fragrance, special to girls.

The princess sighed. "I'm tired. I tried really hard..."

"Thanks for all your good work, Princess Carina. You have become a completely different person from when you first came here. You didn't need much follow-up from me today, for example."

The princess chuckled. "Thanks."

The princess had started taking the initiative constantly. Well, not that much, but she had started interacting with everyone at school more, and she had also started showing up in the dining hall. Whenever she was surrounded by too many people, she would pretend she wasn't feeling well. She had also gracefully dodged barrages of questions and invitations to dates.

Unlike her first day here, she had managed to endure her stay at Kirsch with a wondrous ability to adapt.

"All in all, it's probably thanks to you that I was able to enjoy my days at school, Slowe."

"Thanks to *me*? I do not think that is the case. I haven't done anything."

Yeah, I really haven't. The only thing I've done is snort while scattering the troublesome people following her around sometimes.

"I was able to realize that having someone who understood me nearby was enough to change how I felt about it all, so... Yeah. It really is all thanks to you."

Was she talking about how I would listen to her complaints patiently every day? If that was the case, then my hard work had paid

off, but...

The princess laughed to herself with an eerie smile on her face. "It would be great if I met those girls sometime again."

Though her smile was eerie, there was a reason why I found it to be very heartwarming. *Would you look at that on her wrist?* She wore a bracelet with a string threaded through beads that reflected the light dully, like pearls.

Apparently, just before her final class, a bunch of girls had gifted this to her. They'd said that they made this wishing for her good health, since Princess Carina often fell ill. Sir Dalton, the nearly middle-aged Royal Knight by her side, seemed to rub his reddening eyes after he heard that.

"Congratulations, Princess Carina."

"Ah, well, this is... I'm not happy about it or anything! Technically, it is my duty to meet everyone's expectations, so... It's not that I'm happy about it."

"Yes, I understand. I really, *really* get it..."

"What's with that smile?! B-But well, as long as you get it." The princess sighed. "Someone like me isn't fit to be queen at all, and yet..."

Though she wasn't very honest about it, Princess Carina seemed happy when she looked at the bracelet. Being able to see her true self like this was enough to say that my hard work had paid off.

She often put herself down, saying that she wasn't a person who had what it takes to become the queen, but I knew better. I knew the reason why the current queen of Daryth, the Queen of Light, had appointed Princess Carina as her successor. Even now, light spirits gathered around the princess, trying to cheer her up. The queen probably realized the magical talent of this princess, who seemed to have low self-esteem.

"Jeez, my mother really doesn't understand anything... She's always so self-centered, and she doesn't think about me at all."

Not only that, but Princess Carina's attitude towards Professor Loco Moco had been the real deal. The moment the professor had come into contact with Princess Carina's compassion, he'd changed. As it turned out, Sir Dalton had indeed been the professor's superior back in the Order, and albeit still awkward, the two had managed to work out their differen—*You know what? Let's just say that they did. Yeah.*

"Even if that's the case, I am on your side. I had the honor of watching your efforts from a position closer than anyone else, after all," I said.

Princess Carina hesitated. "Thank you. You're the only one who would say that."

“Please don’t forget the Royal Knights. They are all on your side too, aren’t they? They will probably do everything they can to grant your wish, Your Highness.”

“That’s...that’s a lot of pressure, so I’m not sure how I feel about that. But with this, I have finished the assignment my mother gave to me,” Princess Carina said and smiled slightly.

I couldn’t imagine Princess Carina becoming someone like the current queen in the future, judging by how she behaved now, but I thought that the princess might turn out to be a queen beloved by her people, surprisingly.

“An assignment from Her Majesty?”

“My mother told me to go make friends. You are the only person who truly understands me in Kirsch, but I think I’ve cleared it for now. I can hold my head up high and return to the capital with no doubts now, but... I’m a little disappointed that I didn’t get to meet the funny person that the rumors said you were.”

“I was only able to meet you because I have turned into a proper person, Princess Carina. The Cardinal wouldn’t even have thought of making the request to me if I were still my past self from just a while ago.”

“Ah, I see... Then, I suppose this was for the best,” she said.

“Um... Sorry about that.”

“It’s fine. Just having a confidant makes me feel lighthearted, and learning that fact is enough already, and... I was also able to realize that my decision to suspend the Guardian Selection was correct.”

Personal retainers were the most important people to the members of House Denning, who lived to fight. Similarly, it was very important for Princess Carina to select her Guardian Knight. Even though one of the significant events that would decide her future had been suspended, Princess Carina didn’t have any regrets at all from what I could see from my spot next to her. Not only that, but she even...

“Princess Carina, what do you mean by correct?”

She giggled. “Well, I suppose I’ll say that it’s a s-e-c-r-e-t.”

Then, Princess Carina put on an innocent face and closed her eyes, preparing to sleep. Everyone had their own personal boundaries. *I guess I’ll stop probing into it.*

“I’m a little tired. Please let me sleep for a little while... Do you hear me?” she muttered.

“Yes, Your Highness.”

Princess Carina’s stay at Kirsch had probably been quite exhausting for her. There was no way I could understand the heavy burden on her shoulders as I was a person who had thrown away a glorious future and did as I pleased. *At least while she’s here in the*

carriage...*I should give her time to get some good sleep.*

The person sleeping soundly next to me exuded a noble and sacred aura.

I took a look outside the small window. Throughout our journey, the Royal Knights surrounding the carriage dealt with monsters leaping out from the forest onto the path. "Still... It feels strange as a member of House Denning to be under the protection of the Royal Knights."

Hmm. Something's off. The forest monsters are usually very cautious, so for them to attack the knights repeatedly like this is very strange. Even monsters like them would know they didn't stand a chance at all, and yet... Did the appearance of the dungeon have an effect on them, as I thought?

I shook my head. *No, I'm overthinking it. Alicia looked very worried when she came to see Princess Carina off. Surely, her concern just spread to me, that's all.*

Just like our farewell from school, our welcome was very grandiose. It seemed that Princess Carina's stay at Kirsh was already common knowledge in town. Almost like a repeat of Kirsch, Yoram was filled with a large crowd of onlookers pushing and shoving each other for a glimpse of her. Princess Carina declared that she would step down from her carriage and travel to the landlord's mansion on foot so she could show herself to the people.

I wondered why she'd had such a change of heart. However, I followed her wishes and took her hand into mine as I opened the carriage door.

"She's here! That lady is Her Highness!" an onlooker shouted with excitement.

"The person next to her is the young master of House Denning! He's that amazing guy who beat the bandit who tried to kidnap a noble!"

Bandit? Are they talking about Sepith or something? I thought it over for a moment before I realized what had happened. *Ah, I see. It's the cover-up by the Cardinal. I guess Sepith Pendragon's betrayal never happened in the official records, huh?*

The evening sun, just about to sink below the horizon, cast its light upon the stone buildings of Yoram.

Yoram was a town constructed in a layout similar to Daryth City, the capital of this country. In *Shuya Marionette*, it was the top destination for the protagonist and his gang whenever they snuck out of Kirsch to have fun, but there hadn't been any big events that took place here in the anime.

However... That same Yoram was now in an uproar over the visit of Carina Little Daryth. The Royal Knights and soldiers pushed the people away to make a path that we slowly advanced through.

Suddenly, several soldiers appeared, shouting and pushing their way through the crowd. "Young master!"

I had thought they wanted to talk to Princess Carina, but the armed men didn't even take a single glance at her before kneeling in front of me.

"Young master! The Marshal requests that you visit the mansion!" one said.

"My father? Wasn't he supposed to arrive late tonight?" I asked in a stupor.

"His Excellency is already here in Yoram," the soldier reported.

The Marshal was a title given to the commander of the army of Daryth. In other words, they were referring to my father, who was the current Duke Denning.

"Slowe, you look pale..." the princess trailed off with concern.

"Well...I really wish I could meet him under better circumstances, where I had more time to brace myself."

I had underestimated how far my father would go. Even on the battlefield, my father would always be right on the front lines, and he firmly believed in doing things hands-on. Because of that, somewhere within me, I had my doubts about whether he would really come all the way here to Kirsch and leave the battlefield behind. However, those soldiers had said that my father had already arrived in Yoram.

The plan that I had heard was that my father would come directly to Kirsch so he could direct the dungeon expedition tomorrow, but... *Did he decide to come to Yoram earlier to talk to the Cardinal and the Order first?*

"I am sure you know this, Princess Carina, but my father is, uh...quite a scary person."

"I know that veeery well..." she mumbled.

I'm glad that Charlotte isn't here right now. Even if that wand had been her spoils of war, if my father found out that I had given Charlotte permission to use it, he would definitely make me eat an iron fist as punishment.

The princess didn't talk to me any more after that. Perhaps she was trying to be considerate of my feelings.

The sun had set and the crimson in the sky started bleeding away. I thought it might even rain after this, from the looks of things.

"Hurry!" someone shouted.

"We've gathered some adventurers! They say that they'll start investigating the matter immediately!"

It's really noisy for some reason. I could hear cries of panic mingled among the cheering crowd of people following us. Not only that, but several soldiers ran towards the mansion of the town's landlord, passing us right by. At first, I thought that they were there because my father had come, but the desperation in their gait really bothered me.

I called out to one of the soldiers and asked them for an explanation, only to be told a shocking truth.

"Hey, when did that happen?! When did that report come in?!" I yelled back.

"I-It was just moments ago! Th-There was a report that something was off in the periodical report from Kirsch, and there was a request for aid! On top of that, the monsters in the forest have become more aggressive!"

"And?! What was my father's response to that?!"

"The Marshal discussed this matter with the Order and since it has come to this, the Marshal will take direct command over the response to the situation!"

"My father, going out of his way to take command..." I trailed off. "Hey, sorry about stopping you. Please go ahead."

"Yes, sir!"

The situation was probably an emergency, where every second counted. However, Kirsch Mage Institute was a treasure trove of mages of all talents, even though they were still wet behind the ears. In terms of fighting ability, a bunch of monsters going a little wild in the forest wouldn't be a problem for them. There were even many soldiers there in preparation for the dungeon expedition.

Even though I lined up all these facts...the worried look I saw on Alicia's face as I left Kirsch wouldn't leave my mind.

"I am very sorry, Princess Carina, but I must take my leave here." I turned around and faced the opposite direction of the landlord's mansion. Though I felt guilt towards my father, I would return to the sch—

"Wait, Slowe," a familiar voice called my name. I couldn't help my eyes drifting over on instinct.

There was a man walking in our direction with numerous soldiers behind him.

"Where do you plan on going? I'm right in front of you."

The man with a crimson coat on his back had an overwhelming presence, and just the mere sight of him was enough to make people cower with awe and fear. Feeling the effects of it, the crowd broke out into a silent commotion around him.

Kirsch was in big trouble, but I couldn't help stopping in my tracks. It even felt as if my heart was being squeezed hard by the

claws of a vulture. However, this reaction was only natural. I could honestly say that I had seen this coming.

After all, this man was the person who put more expectations on my shoulders than anyone else, and he had also always been firmly on my side, even in the world of *Shuya Marionette*.

“Slowe, are you okay? I think you should listen to a rundown of the situation from the duke at least, though. Surely there’s enough time for that.”

I had probably made a very strange face. Princess Carina looked at me with worry in her eyes, and she gently embraced my sudden anxiety with her kindness.

“Yes, you are right,” I said slowly.

“Well, I was in your care at school, so it’s my turn now. Do you hear me?”

“Loud and clear, Your Highness.”

The future queen’s warm hand overlapped my right hand. “Well then. Shall we head off, Slowe?”

“Yes, Princess Carina. Let’s.”

Now then, here I go. A very important person is waiting for me right there.

“It has been a while, father.”

“...Indeed.”

I stared straight forward at the man. My father, Balderoy Denning, was the man in charge of the military in this country and had been an antagonist in *Shuya Marionette*. His face seemed to shift with strong emotion. It was the first time I had seen that face on my father, and...

“H-Huh? Slowe?”

If this had been the anime, this probably would have been quite a moving scene. However, *that* appeared out of nowhere. An overwhelming pressure fell on my shoulders. I immediately pulled the princess over and brought her into my arms.

“You... How dare you!” a Royal Knight shouted in indignation at me, sending off bloodlust in my direction. I completely ignored him.

After all, I sensed an enormous, dreadful chill going down my spine.

“Father... There is something there! Its target is Princess Carina!” I yelled.

Indeed. It was aiming for this kind girl. That was why I had brought Carina Little Daryth into my arms. Maybe because I’d pulled her a little too hard, she was pressed tight against my chest. My heart, which had been calm, now thumped hard in my chest. I smelt her

pleasant fragrance, and I could feel her soft chest through my clothing. However, I didn't have the heart to enjoy it at all.

"Wh-What is this? I can't breathe..." The princess in my arms seemed to notice *it* too.

Princess Carina, the triple-element master who had easily demolished monsters in the dungeon, was now paling in fear. With that, the Royal Knights standing near the princess finally realized what was going on.

"Please do not worry, Princess Carina. I *will* protect you," I declared.

"...Whoa. You're so close, Slowe..." The princess mumbled in a daze.

The very next moment, I felt as if my shoulders were being crushed by an overwhelming weight. My chest hurt, and I couldn't breathe. Despair fell over me, and it felt as if I had no hope of being alive after a few seconds. This strong hatred in the atmosphere was on a whole other level compared to when I had first met the Great Spirit of Wind.

Suddenly, a deafening roar rang out from somewhere, piercing my ears. It was the roar of someone in such a great rage that they were about to destroy the world in a frenzy.

"In the sky, huh?!" I exclaimed.

The roar rattled my eardrums. From somewhere up above, with the sun long gone, *that thing* came down with its crushingly heavy aura.



It wasn't anywhere to be found. It also didn't know how long it had slept.

However, one fact was clear. The country it had loved, the places where it had precious memories with her... It was all gone. Thus, it gave its inferno to those impudent monsters that monopolized that land.

But...it didn't understand. *Why did I wake from the sleep of death?* Searching for the reason, Sekhmet followed the sounds. The Guardian Dragon, which had lived for ages, had become closer to nature as time passed. It was so closely tied to the world that it could even sense the voices of invisible spirits.

The people who'd inherited the blood of the woman it had loved were strongly adored by light spirits. If somebody with her blood was indeed alive, then it should be able to hear the whispers of light around that person.

It listened carefully. *I can hear it.* There were two whispers nearby. Its body wasn't anywhere close to being alive, but it summoned

the last of its strength and took to the skies.

And then, it found the source. That was why it had come here.

From high above in the skies, Sekhmet set its sights on the girl with rose-gold blonde hair, and it flew down from the great heavens, descending towards the girl doted on by light spirits.

It landed on the ground before Carina Little Daryth, the princess of Daryth.

The overwhelming howl of the dragon shook the air once again.

Seeing a being at least ten times taller than themselves, the people of Yoram were floored. *How big would it be if it stretched its wings?* one onlooker wondered.

The black dragon boldly showed its obsidian body—barely distinguishable from the night sky—to the greatest military force of Daryth, the Order of the Royal Knights. The monster, also called the King of the Skies in the north, had manifested right before their eyes.

“A dragon, and a *black* dragon at that?!” Duke Denning said in shock.

The eyes with a fiery glow looked towards the duke.

Why? Why? Why would it come here, right at this moment?

Questions streamed in the duke’s head.

“Duke! What is all this noise?!” the Cardinal yelled. He had come from the mansion after he heard the commotion outside, and now he also saw the black dragon before them all.

The moment the Cardinal’s eyes met the creature’s cold, inhuman ones, he realized a chilling truth. The Commander of the Order had a glorious history where he’d wielded his sword as a fellow Royal Knight several decades ago. However, the strength of this creature far surpassed the level that any mere human could hope to achieve. The Cardinal felt the incredible pressure from the dragon as it stared down at the humans. The Royal Knights around Carina were also visibly stricken with fear, frozen to their spots.

While these humans were overtaken by their fear, the black dragon slowly opened its mouth. None of them could even hope to compare to the dragon’s might due to the sheer difference in scale between humans and a higher species. Their instincts screamed at them all. *If you don’t want to die, then run.*

“Wait.” Besides Slowe, the Cardinal was the only one who realized just what the dragon’s glowing stomach was implying. “Don’t tell me, this dragon’s aim is—”

The Cardinal, who also served as the Royal Commander, had read an account of this in a book somewhere.

“Whenever the black dragon’s stomach is engulfed in light, beware.”

“It is an inferno. An inferno that nothing can withstand.”

That glow was the telltale sign of *Dragon Breath*. After a direct hit, not even the target’s bones would remain. And directly in the dragon’s crosshairs was the girl said to be the future of Daryth.

This was why the Cardinal, who’d sworn his undying loyalty to Daryth’s Royal Family of Light, immediately cried out without any care of humiliation or damage to his reputation:

“Royal Knights, protect Her Highness!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!”



At the end of the long road connecting Kirsch Mage Institute and Yoram, a crowd of people waited at the ready at the main gates of Kirsch. The gate was made of large stones piled on top of each other and noble students brandishing their wands, commoners wielding swords, and soldiers all stood around it in their various positions.

The noble students here were all talented, with names famous across the whole campus, such as the Mithril of House Lasbury, a marquess house, and the Three-Legged Crow of House Woodaul, a baron house.

“What in the world happened?!” Shuya exclaimed. “Ah, it is you, Lord Woodaul! Your dark magic is at full-throttle! What is going on?”

“Oh, Shuya... It seems that the dungeon core has been stolen,” the male student replied slowly.

“It *seems*?! You sound way too relaxed about this!” Shuya couldn’t help but exclaim.

It was clear that if the sturdy gates were breached, an avalanche of monsters would flood in and invade the school. Everyone who could fight was gathered here, holding their weapons and showing what it meant to be a mage to the monsters piling onto the main gates.

“Why would the monsters come to the school just because the dungeon was destroyed though?!” Shuya continued.

“Why would I know something like that? But the truth is if they get past here, the school is doomed. See, there’s another bunch coming now. It looks like a group of kobold soldiers. Shuya, do something about them with your flames.”

Shuya inhaled sharply and cast his spells. The kobold soldiers were extremely nimble and easily dodged Shuya’s *Fire Arrows*.

“Oh, wow. That’s pretty pathetic, Shuya,” the older boy barked out with a laugh.

“This isn’t the time to be laughing! Ugh, they’re coming this wa— W-Whoa, you’re awesome! Well, I mean, your dark spell is a creepy three-legged crow as always, but still!”

“Calling it ‘creepy’ was one word too many. That aside, Shuya, look behind you. Your friend is here.” Woodaul gestured.

“Hey, Shuya! I couldn’t find you anywhere... Why are you *here*, of all places?!” Alicia exclaimed.

“W-Whoa, Alicia! That’s *my* line! What are *you* doing here?!”

“I heard rumors that monsters were trying to swarm us so I came to see what had happened! Then I found you here, and...” Alicia looked around. “More importantly, what’s with that gigantic horde of monsters?! Ugh, from the looks of this, it’s obvious what happened in the forest!”

“Obvious?! What is?” Shuya exclaimed back.

“That a monster stole the dungeon core! This is called a horde invasion, you know! Jeez, what are the soldiers doing?! If they let this kind of thing happen, then they’re nothing more than useless salary thieves, sitting around and getting paid for nothing!”

“Y-You just...” Shuya was at a loss for words. “What are you saying so loudly around this many soldiers?!”

“Is there a problem with speaking the truth?!” Alicia retorted. “Shuya, look! The cathedral’s being set up as a shelter! Come over...here!” Alicia pulled at Shuya’s arm, trying to drag him away.

However, even then, Shuya clung to the main gates. The school was in great danger, and there was no way he could run with his tail between his legs without doing anything. Meanwhile, Alicia tugged at Shuya’s uniform, wanting to bring one of her very few friends to safety.

“You stubborn mule, stop trying to look all cool!” she said, frustrated. “Not only that, but Shuya, there’s no way you can do anything about a monster that huge, so *come over here!*”

“S-Stop it, Alicia! My clothes will stretch out! Wait, what?! That’s a cyclops!!! E-Everyone, that monster *must* be the dungeon master! Those are only supposed to exist in the north, so I am *very* sure of it! If we defeat it, then the monsters will definitely return to the forest!”

Shuya, drawing on his experience as an adventurer, knew very well that the giant with one eye shouldn’t exist here in the south. His intuition told him that *this* was the monster who’d caused the horde invasion.

“If that’s the dungeon master, then... Whoever beats it will be awarded a decoration from the country,” another student muttered.

Having absorbed the dungeon core, the cyclops was much larger than normal. It held up one of the fallen kobold soldiers from the ground in one hand and used it as a shield from the spells as it advanced forward. Whenever its meat shield was worn out, the cyclops would once again grab a monster that died in front of it as a new shield.

“Burn it together with the monster it’s using as a shield!” a student shouted.

“Earth magic! Use earth magic to stop it in its tracks!”

“Oh, yikes. Even my dark spell wouldn’t work on it, huh?”

Panicked students inside the gate shouted left and right. Seeing them, the cyclops couldn’t stop roaring with mocking laughter as it continuously tossed dead monsters in their way. At the same time, lightning struck somewhere with a booming crack. The students nearly fell onto their backs at the thunderous sound. The moment they had noticed their lapse in attention...

“Aaaah!!!!!!!!!!!!!!”

“Hey, are you okay?”

“Lightning struck very close to us!”

“Huh?! That big monster isn’t there anymore!”

The cyclops had seemingly disappeared into the darkness. The mages had lost sight of the enemy monster who had taken advantage of the chaos.

“Hey, y’all. You’re not used to fighting, unlike those brats from the north, huh?”

The cyclops came down on them from above. It had leaped into the sky, going through a series of flexible movements and mimicking a spring with its body. It had never occurred to anyone that something so large could jump that high. This cyclops had evolved after endless battles to the death in the dungeon, and its jumping ability greatly surpassed the students’ expectations.

Without giving the students time to catch their breath, the cyclops took out the hidden dagger from its back and it swung towards the heart of the student with red hair.

“Shuya, watch out!” someone cried.

In the brief moments before the attack reached him, Shuya finally realized the facts. *As Alicia said, I should have taken shelter in the cathedral...*

However...

“Newkern, get out of the waaay!!!!!!!!!!!!!!”

The spell of the former Royal Knight struck the side of the cyclops’s face, blowing it off spectacularly.

“The main gate has fallen! Everyone, please do not panic, and evacuate calmly!” the headmaster’s voice rang out in everyone’s minds.

Since the cyclops had taken down the school gate, monsters poured in from the forest. If these were just forest monsters and not dungeon monsters, the students could have dealt with the enemies with their own abilities. However, this was a horde invasion of

dungeon-spawned monsters advancing in unison under the orders of the cyclops, their dungeon master.

"The headmaster is holding up a barrier centered around the front of the cathedral! Monsters can't get in! We must run there!"

Students fled towards the square before the cathedral, guided by the headmaster's voice. Charlotte was one of them. She had run here as fast as she could from the dorms, panting for breath.

Charlotte looked up and saw a monster with wings overhead, flying as if it owned the place. It laughed mockingly with a shrill cry, almost as if it was declaring that the world belonged to the monsters.

"That's..." Charlotte gasped. "No way. Tina!"

Charlotte spotted her friend, who was shaking with fear at the many monsters closing in on her. Dozens of monsters lay dead on the training grounds, and the newbie mage stood in the center of them all. *Had she been practicing magic this late into the night?*

"She works way too hard! She even has talent... If she practices that hard, there's no way I can win against her!" Charlotte couldn't help but complain out loud.

Charlotte was so scared that her legs were shaking. This was more terrifying than the time she'd gone down into the dungeon, and on top of that, Charlotte was a failure of a mage. However, there wasn't any hesitation nor anxiety in Charlotte's heart as she made her next move.

"One, two, three, four! Okay, I probably can deal with them!" Charlotte exclaimed.

No. I can't, she thought at the same time. For a girl whose magic was only useful for stopping little pebbles... For a girl who couldn't even stop the movement of mini golems, which weren't even alive... Dealing with monsters was a pie-in-the-sky dream.

However, ever since she'd sprinkled that perfume, she had felt confident somehow. She was ready for anything, and she felt as if she could do anything. Even if that had been an effect of the Pendragon jinx, which gave the user a temporary false sense of omnipotence, it was just fine.

"*Lock on. Lock on. Lock on,*" she chanted. "All right!"

She pointed her wand towards the monsters she could see on the training field. This wasn't an offensive spell. She pictured the hands on a clock in her mind and imagined the monsters' movements coming to a sudden halt.

"Can you really do it?"

She had always put it off to someday in the future, but...just like how Slowe Denning had decided to change his way of life after he saw

his future, Charlotte had finally hardened her resolve to start a new life.

“Can you really do it? You, who have always run away from your past?”

“Can I do it?! This isn’t the time to be thinking about that!” Charlotte yelled. “Reach them, *Clock*—”

Just like that, for the first time in her life, the princess of a destroyed kingdom waved her wand in answer to the whispers of the spirits.



The dragon howled.

No. Wrong. It had sensed the whispers of the light spirits around her, but the girl engulfed in the flames hadn’t inherited *her* blood. Surrounded by this blazing, all-encompassing inferno, the black dragon admitted that it had made a mistake.

I can’t see. I can’t see anything. This body is already dead. I can’t even feel the heat of the flames. Its only choice was to rely on the whispers of the light spirits now.

The dragon turned the entire surrounding area into ash in the inferno, and the monster once called the Guardian Dragon roared again. It stretched out its enormous wings and flew off.

And now, within the hellish field of burning flames left behind...

The Cardinal wavered as he walked unsteadily like a zombie until he finally found the princess and grabbed her by the shoulder. “Your Highness! Are you hurt anywhere?!” he shouted.

“I-I’m fine, Maldini. Slowe protected me, so... But that thing... That thing earlier... It’s the first time I’ve ever seen something like that.” Princess Carina laughed nervously. “D-Dragons sure are scary, huh? It’s definitely impossible to tame something like that...”

The entire area, including the landlord’s mansion itself, had been utterly destroyed by Sekhmet. It was almost as if a hurricane had gone by. Even the residential area where many nobles lived had been turned into dust.

Screams and cries for help rang out from all directions, the voices piercing through the dark night.

“Commander! There...there is some bad news from the adventurers we sent into the forest,” a knight approached and reported.

“Speak!”

“According to the adventurers, there is a horde invasion underway. They say that a monster probably stole the dungeon core and that the current dungeon master caused all this!”

“A horde invasion?!” Maldini exclaimed in shock. “It’s

unthinkable for a monster that powerful to appear in a remote area like that!"

"Not only that, there is a great probability that Kirsch is the target of the invasion, and—"

That black dragon earlier, and now a horde invasion. *Just where do I start?* The Cardinal racked his brain for options. Then, Duke Denning, who had desperately been using wind magic to quench the fires, approached the Cardinal.

"Your Highness!" he exclaimed, addressing the princess. "Where is my son, Slowe?!"

"S-Slowe?" Carina looked around, but she couldn't find him anywhere. "H-Huh? He was just here moments ago."

Suddenly, droplets of water sprinkled down from the sky, almost as if they were trying to cool the princess's red cheeks.

The area was already shrouded in darkness, and now, there was rain. Large droplets of what was no longer just a drizzle of water poured down from the overcast sky and pattered steadily against the ground, washing warmth away from the world.

In the sky, the moon illuminated the clouds with a white and blue glow.

This was the first time that the people in Yoram felt frightened by the light that had usually watched over them.

The townsfolk of Yoram clamored around a group of soldiers, the atmosphere tense as they confronted them.

"Why are you stopping us?! Let us go on to Kirsch!" one shouted.

"You're supposed to be soldiers, aren't you?!" another added.

"We can't let you go because our jobs are to protect you, the people of Yoram! Look at *that*! It's a monster! If you enter the forest now, you'll all be finished!" a soldier yelled.

The soldiers in armor desperately tried to stop the townsfolk from leaving.



Ah, jeez. The soldiers and townspeople near the exit to the forest path have started arguing again. This is getting quite troublesome... Well, to be frank, this whole situation is no joke.

Many pairs of red eyes belonging to monsters gleamed in the forest and looked towards the commotion. Some of them were frenzied, leaping out towards the town. The monsters were normally quite docile, but now they were all aggravated by the dragon's roar.

"Adventurers are currently searching the forest! Please wait here until they return!" the soldier pleaded.

"I can't wait for that! My child is in Kirsch!"

The back-and-forth continued. *It's only natural that the soldiers are stopping them, though.* Right now, the forest path was swarming with monsters. Going in was practically asking to be killed, and the soldier only spoke the truth. If common folk with little combat experience tried to enter, they would just die for naught at the claws of berserk monsters before they could reach Kirsch.

A loud and insistent snort sounded out from somewhere nearby.

"That just now was an Earl Orc, wasn't it? There's no way that monster could have lived in this forest, so it probably came out of the dungeon..." I muttered.

This was *definitely* a horde invasion. The dungeon core had fallen into the hands of a foreign monster. Thinking back on it, Alicia's worry had probably been in anticipation of this very event.

You know, she's probably pissed off right now, shouting, "I told you so!" I shivered. I dreaded the next time we would meet. *She might even slap me in the face... No, a slap is still fine. Worse, she might even punch me.* I sighed inwardly. *Ugh. To be honest, things are so terrible that I've done a three-sixty and gone past panicking and I've moved into calm territory instead.*

A completely new turn of events had started ever since Princess Carina came to visit Kirsch. Still, I should have known better. I knew very well that *Shuya Marionette's* world was a harsh and cruel place. That was the very reason why the anime's Piggy Duke never took his eyes off Charlotte.

"Still... How much longer is he going to take?" I muttered.

At this point, every second counted. If I wanted to return to Kirsch as soon as possible, I needed a horse. After I'd protected Princess Carina from the *Dragon Breath*, I'd spoken to a certain man who had been rendered dumbstruck by it all.

As long as Headmaster Morozov and Professor Loco Moco were at Kirsch, they should be able to deal with most potential situations. However, this was the world of *Shuya Marionette*, and I always had to plan for the worst possible scenario.

I went silent at that thought, thinking back on what had happened earlier. *So that's a dragon, huh? It's the first time that I've seen one in person. Shuya... That guy was able to face an extraordinary being like that in the anime. Like I thought, he really is nothing to laugh at. I've faced a real dragon myself now, and I can understand that. That thing isn't something humans can hope to match.*

That wasn't all. The dragon that I had just encountered was bigger than the dragon Shuya had fought and was way more famous. After all, that black dragon... That was the Guardian Dragon of Huzak.

That dragon was a legendary creature and had disappeared a

hundred years ago. There was no way it would appear now, right? Wrong. There was no way I could mistake the characteristics of a monster related to Charlotte. So...that was definitely Sekhmet.

“Milord!”

There were very few people who called me by that title. I turned around and Silva, the former Knight of the Twin Wings—now wearing a white cape—approached me, bringing not one, but *two* horses with him. One more than I had asked for.

“I have brought over horses that even among those owned by the Order are especially brave and calm. Milord, are you possibly planning to head down the path by yourself? Right now, the army is making preparations to make the journey to Kirsch, with Duke Denning at the center of command. If you head there with them, then —”

“Silva, this is a horde invasion,” I cut him off. “I do not have the time to wait for my father to act.”

“That’s what they call ‘reckless,’” Silva said firmly. “Even if *you* are fine, the horses would collapse midway.”

Silva probably had an inkling of what was going on with the dragon as well. Like Professor Loco Moco, he too had been an adventurer once. This extremely talented swordsman had clawed his way up to the top of the candidates for Guardian Knight despite his commoner status. However, I could still hear the fear in the man’s voice.

It couldn’t be helped. Dragons were mighty beings, and it was rare to even get a glimpse of one in the south. Just the thought of facing such an overwhelming being again would instill fear in anyone’s heart.

“I’m sure you came to the same conclusion as I did. Even if my father directly requests the Cardinal to dispatch the Royal Knights, the Cardinal would not be cooperative. To add to that, the current scale of troops here in Yoram means that they cannot travel down the path quickly enough.”

If the dragon had headed towards Kirsch, every second counted. That dragon had been in a rage. It probably realized that Huzak had been destroyed... *It might have appeared before us because it mistook Princess Carina for a descendant of the Royal White Lilies since she has the favor of light spirits.*

“Milord... The Order is not such a cold-blooded organization.”

“But it’s the truth. With the possibility of the dragon coming back, they wouldn’t dispatch the Royal Knights to Kirsch. After all, *Carina Little Daryth* is in this town. Her safety is more important to the Royal Knights than Kirsch Mage Institute. You would know that since you

interact with them every day.”

Silva stood still and didn't reply. He probably knew that I was speaking the truth.

Hearing my father's request, the Cardinal would probably say, “We do not have confirmation that the dragon in question is attacking Kirsch. There is also the possibility that the dragon might return here to Yoram.”

The Cardinal placed the royal family on a pedestal above all else. That was why he and the Royal Knights would use all their resources to protect Princess Carina.

“In that case, milord, I shall go with you,” Silva declared.

“Don't be stupid. You're currently in the Order and you are an important part of the royal family's military force. Even if the Guardian Selection has been suspended, you're still the top candidate for the Guardian Knight,” I reminded him.

Silva was silent for a moment, but he spoke up again with conviction. “I cannot let you go alone, milord. If I leave you be, then from the looks of it you will head down the forest path all by yourself.”

“I wouldn't do that.”

“You would,” he said firmly. “That's why you bade me bring you a fearless horse of the Order.”

I should have expected nothing less from him. Silva was very sharp; that hadn't changed. He had always been a man who wouldn't take a lie at face value. I didn't have the time to argue with Silva right now, so I relented.

“Fine, you're right. I am positive that the dragon is headed to Kirsch. That is why I asked you to bring along a courageous horse that can withstand traveling down the path in the current state it is in. A normal horse would be too afraid of the monsters.”

“Milord... Please be realistic!” Silva pleaded. “No matter how great you are at magic, there is no way you could make your way down that path in time! It's the horse that's actually running down the path, not you yourself! If your horse gets hit by a monster even once, it's all over!”

“That's not necessarily true. Silva...if you lend me your sword, it would be possible.”

That was the real reason why I had summoned Silva.

“My sword? Milord, are you insane?”

Currently, traversing the forest path was a thorny task with many difficult obstacles on the way. It probably wouldn't be possible with just my own power. This was completely different from defeating No Face or Sepith Pendragon.

“Silva, I'm always serious. If I have your Mystical Sword, then...it

is possible.”

The national treasure of Daryth, the Mystical Sword, was traditionally given to the official candidate for Guardian Knight. It wasn't a normal sword; it was made from magical ore. For those who couldn't use magic, this miraculous ore provided the wielder with the power to fight toe to toe with a mage.

“How would the Mystical Sword of Light help you to make the journey there? Milord, this sword isn't as convenient as you think.”

Due to the materials it was made from, the Mystical Sword could be enchanted with a magic element. In fact, due to the sheer amount of ore used in its production, the average mage couldn't even pour enough magic into it to enchant it. The sword in Silva's possession was a magical sword enchanted with the power of Lectrikuhl, the Great Spirit of Light and the guardian deity of Daryth.

“I am not lying. I *will* be able to make my way to Kirsch if I use that sword. You can just say that I attacked you and stole it off you or something. I shall take full responsibility for everything.”

Silva went quiet. The light emanating from the sword at his hip seeped out from its sheath.

It was out of the question to hand over this national treasure to anyone else without official permission. The Mystical Sword of Light didn't technically belong to Silva. Daryth's royal family was only lending it to him temporarily since he was the top candidate for Guardian Knight. And yet here I was, telling him to hand it over to me even though I had considered the possibility of Silva being charged for this. *Yeah, I know. I am a selfish, terrible, and utterly awful human.*

In the end, I hadn't changed at all compared to back then, when I had decided to become the blackhearted Piggy Duke.

Silva hesitated for a long while. However...

“At this rate, they'll break through! Someone go call for reinforcements!” a soldier shouted.

“Yes, sir!”

I saw people trying to get past the soldiers, wanting to get onto the path to Kirsch. At this rate, this might escalate from a dispute into a riot. *I suppose I can't wait any longer.*

“Sorry, but I don't have any more time. I'm heading off,” I said.

It would be cruel of me to ask him to decide on the spot. Lending a national treasure to someone else, even temporarily, could even lead to him getting the death penalty. It's obvious that he would hesitate.

I ignored Silva, who was deep in his thoughts, and saddled up on the horse he'd brought over, taking its reins into my hands. It would have been the best-case scenario if I had the Mystical Sword, but beggars couldn't be choosers. I would make my way to Kirsch on my own power alone.

This horse is quite calm, I noted. I should have expected nothing less from those used by the Order. If I have this horse, then I should be able to make it to Kirsch. I'll need to thank Silva, as just being able to borrow this horse is a huge help. And...it's asking too much for me to rely on him after everything that happened.

After all, I was a terrible person who'd ignored this man all this time, even though I thought of him as my friend for life.

Silva spoke up after a moment of silence. "Please wait."

"What is it?"

"Milord, I... If I ever had one more chance... There were a lot of things I wanted to ask you if I ever had the chance to talk to you like this. What happened to you back then? Why did you—"

"Leave this for later, Silva."

"But now, talking to you like this, I can tell. Milord, you actually haven't changed at all from your past self."

There were yells and screams, and then the sounds of spells exploding somewhere. In the tug-of-war between the soldiers and the townsfolk, it seemed that the townsfolk had only gotten more upset. *This is bad. At this rate, a large group of people will force themselves into the forest. That would only result in tragedy.*

"Becoming a little chubby didn't change who you were on the inside. Surely we just weren't able to see past your facade, and I only realized this fact just now. So that's why—" In the darkness, a man spoke. It was the man who had managed to rise all the way to the top candidate for Guardian Knight somewhere without my knowledge. And then, he got onto the other horse with way more grace and skill than I'd had.

"Don't do something stupid!" I exclaimed. "Right now, you are under the command of *that* Johannes Maldini! If you come with me, then you'll also be charged! Your current station is next to the princess!"

"I do not mind." This guy smiled as if that all didn't matter to him one bit.

"You don't mind???" I parroted. "Seriously..."

"No matter what kind of crime I get charged for, it doesn't matter. To start, I was simply going with the flow when the Order took me in. I wasn't there because I wanted to be. Yes, indeed... No matter where I go, I am nothing but a mere commoner." Silva drew the Mystical Sword, and brilliant light flowed out into the dark night.

The people arguing at the entrance of the forest path, who hadn't stopped at anything up until now, looked over our way to see what had happened. Suddenly, someone realized just who Silva was. They all cried for help, pleading for the commoner hero to help them.

The current Guardian Knight was Rudolf Delfrey, the strongest man in Daryth and the right-hand man of Daryth's queen, and he always had the symbolic Mystical Sword of Light with him. And now, the other man who held the companion Mystical Sword of Light cast away his white cape, the symbol of a protector of royalty, almost as if he was answering the cries of the townsfolk.

This was proof of his conviction: the conviction that he wouldn't be tied down by the title of Royal Knight.

"Are you out of your mind...?" I couldn't help but ask.

"To be frank, milord, I actually share the same opinion as you. That black dragon is definitely heading towards Kirsch. We certainly have no time to stand around here in a place like this."

The man who had risen from commoner to the top candidate for Guardian Knight now threw away everything without hesitation and raised his shining sword into the air.

"Milord... I shall leave this in your hands."

Seeing this man's conviction, I—



Chapter 5: Kirsch Mage Institute

The outcome of the battle was clear, and the victor was decided immediately. The humans of Kirsch Mage Institute knew that they only had defeat ahead of them. Perhaps they were no match for the monsters even from the start. The students in Kirsch were still youths, just partway through their journey of learning. It was too early for them to throw themselves into fights against monsters with their lives on the line.

“Run!”

“They’ve broken through the main gates!”

“Run, the monsters are coming!”

“Get out of heeere!!!!!!!!!!”

“I’ve read about this in a book before! The earlier earthquake had to have been caused by the dungeon’s destruction!”

“The dungeon core was stolen by a monster!”

“We need to get away!!!!!!!!!!!!!!”

“Everyone, hurry to the Cathedral! Do not think about fighting them! This is no longer the time for that!” the headmaster’s voice echoed in everyone’s heads.

To humans, monsters that lived in the forest and those spawned from a dungeon were pretty much the same things. The moment that one of these monsters from the dungeon managed to invade the campus, the tide of the battle had turned in the favor of the monsters. Even though Kirsch Mage Institute was supposed to be a world of humans, it had now transformed into a world for monsters. Following the cyclops’s orders, the monsters continued to raze everything in their path.

“The Order of Royal Knights must have realized the distress we are in! They are still in Yoram!”

Thus, as the defeated party of this fight, the humans could only run for their lives. All they could do was head towards the only safe place for them that was left, located in the heart of the school. The barrier centered around the cathedral was their only land of respite.

“Everyone, run to the cathedral!!!!!!!!!!!!!!”

This was only the beginning of the ravage of monsters. Kirsch Mage Institute had lost the battle after all.

A soldier barked out orders. “Vanguard, go reinforce the main

gates! We shall evacuate the students and staff of this school!"

"Come this way! Hurry to the cathedral!"

The soldiers, whose presence had thankfully increased recently to prepare for the dungeon expedition, split off into several units and spread across the entire campus to swiftly guide students to safety. With solemn and fierce expressions, the soldiers instructed the students on where to go. These burly armored men weren't elites in the army; they were simply regular soldiers assigned to a remote place. However, to the students right now, nothing seemed more reliable than these people.

Everyone knew what tragedy would lay at the end of a horde invasion.

Under the dark cloak of night, two girls ran through a crowd of people in blind desperation.

"Tina, let's take a shortcut!"

"Thank you very much for what you did earlier, Miss Charlotte! I froze because I was surprised that I was able to put up a better fight against the monsters than I thought!"

The howls of monsters that had reached Charlotte's ears at that time had been a lot more frightening than when she had gone down into the dungeon. However, the spell she had feverishly cast hit the monsters and did its work. Charlotte didn't let her success at magic get into her head, though, and she hurried towards the cathedral, holding the hand of her friend the whole way.

"Jeez! Master Slowe often warned that people like you would let your guard down at the worst moment. You must be careful!" Charlotte exclaimed.

"Captain Heinz! The main gate has sustained serious damage! There are too many monsters; we cannot keep them at bay! On top of that, we have sighted the silhouettes of wyverns in the sky! The commotion may have attracted them here!" a soldier shouted.

Together with the soldiers overseeing the evacuation, the girls looked up towards the sky. The rain only grew in intensity as winged monsters flew in circles, gliding through the sky gracefully. They soared below the full moon, which peeked out from behind the clouds.

"We'll shoot them down, starting with the bigger targets! Everyone, ready your wands... And *Fire!* Shoot as many spells at them as you can!"

Beams of magic in a myriad of colors flew across the sky, aiming for the wyverns.

"Students still outside, you do not have to do anything more! Evacuate to the cathedral at once!"

“And that’s my twentieth monster. I’m the winner of this monster extermination match, Shuya,” Woodaul declared.

A group of students ran towards the cathedral along with soldiers. These students had tried to prevent the invasion of monsters until the very last second at the main gates, even though a few had slipped by their resistance. However, this group had finally chosen to evacuate to the cathedral as well.

“But the monsters you beat were all orcs!” Shuya argued. “I defeated not one, but *two* lizardmen! In terms of quality, I won hands down!”

“Shuya... I left those for you because I wanted you to gain confidence. Oh, my Three-Legged Crow took down another one, so I can add one lizardman to my counter. See? It is my one-sided win.”

The monsters attacked the evacuating group, almost as if they were retaliating for their earlier resistance at the gate. However, these weren’t any random students, but the cream of the crop at this school, who wished to join the Daryth Army and Duke Denning. With clear eyes and sharp minds, these nobles wielded their wands and joined the soldiers, shooting down monsters with their spells.

“Lord Woodaul, do you really think help is on the way, like the headmaster said?”

“The Order takes a lot of time to move, so the army would probably arrive first. Also, remember the Royal Knights’ cold attitude towards us during the princess’s stay? And on top of that, I heard rumors that the Marshal has already arrived in Yoram. The Marshal himself would probably come to subjugate the monsters.”

“Huh?! The Marshal is already in Yoram?! Then I’ll need to prove my worth as best as I can! Once we get to the cathedral, I’ll give the monsters outside the barrier another good beatdown!”

“Shuya!” Alicia cut in. “Are you crazy?!”

“But, the Marshal!” Shuya argued. “*Duke Denning* himself is coming! This is a great opportunity to get a head start!”

The only ones having fun in this situation were these students who wished to join the army.

The powerful Headmaster Morozov was currently holding up an impenetrable barrier around the cathedral. These bold students understood that a normal monster couldn’t destroy the barrier around the only safe area in the school. And in this group, the faint light of the moon lit up a certain blonde boy’s face with a pale, blue glow as he panted. It was Valjean Greatlorde.

“That aside... Hey, Goldilocks. Are you okay? You don’t look so good,” Woodaul noted.

“I-I am fine.” Valjean breathed in and out deeply.

“Honestly, you did very well, blondie. Shuya isn’t the only second-

year who has guts, huh?"

"Th-Thank you very much..."

Valjean ran towards the cathedral, panting hard, an unseemly act for a noble. His mind was filled with a blur of thoughts: that he didn't want to die, he wanted to live, and for someone to *please* save him.

Right now, the professor was probably dealing with the walking dungeon that took the form of a cyclops. Valjean was worried about the safety of his professor, but he also understood that if he stayed he would only get in the way with his abilities...or lack thereof.

Alicia noticed a girl at the side of the school building who seemed to have been left behind. The petrified maid hadn't escaped in time, and a monster was approaching her.

"Shuya!" Alicia shouted from the circle of soldiers surrounding her. "There's a maid over there!"

"That's bad. All right, time for one last job. Soldiers and everyone else, please escort Lady Alicia to the cathedral. Shuya and I will save that maid," Woodaul said.

"Huh? Lord Woodaul, wh-why me?" Shuya stammered.

"Well, I have to make sure my promising underclassman gains all sorts of experience, you see. More importantly, are you scared, Shuya? If that's the case, you can run away with Lady Alicia."

The third-year's tone sounded almost like a challenge, and the boy who would have been the world's savior in another timeline felt his heart fire up. Even without the challenge, there was no way he could ignore the maid's distress.

"I-I am not scared at all! I will go!"

"Shuya! Come with me!" Alicia ordered.

"Alicia! You know what I'm like by now! Go ahead of me!" he shouted back.

Alicia took a sharp inhale of breath. "Then hurry and catch up quickly, you hear me?!"

Alicia Bulla Dia Cirquista was the person who currently needed to be protected more than anyone else in this school. The soldiers bowed their heads in thanks to Shuya and Woodaul and hurried to the cathedral.

"So, Lord Woodaul... Um, what is our plan of attack?"

"I'll distract the monster and make it focus on me. Save that maid after I make an opening. That's all."

The plan was plain and simple, and the confident smile on the third-year's face was very assuring. However, Shuya couldn't help but feel a bit uneasy.

"Okay, I understand, but isn't that too easy?!" Shuya began

sprinting as Woodaul covered for him.

Woodaul, the young man with a slightly sorrowful aura, cast his spell and the monster was enveloped in darkness. It seemed that wasn't strong enough to defeat it outright and the enraged monster fixed its eyes on him. Meanwhile, Shuya sprinted on, following the third-year's instructions. The maid was paralyzed with fear and couldn't stand up, and Shuya gripped her hand firmly, preparing to run off. Right at that moment...

"Shuya! From the sky!" Woodaul shouted.

"Wha—"

A monster descended rapidly from above. Shuya felt goosebumps rise all over his body. However, Shuya pushed the maid away with as much force as he could muster, and he turned so that the monster's claw would sink into his back instead of hers. The pain was torturous, but he gritted his teeth and endured it. Suddenly, he heard the shocked, pained shriek of the monster. The third-year had probably cast a spell at it. Shuya immediately took the maid's hand in his and ran for the hills.

"Sir Highland, we have finished evacuating the students! Morozov has ordered for our retreat, and—"

Loco Moco growled, showing that he'd heard the soldier. "I get it! I'll retreat while fightin' this dude!"

"Sir Highland, do you need our assist—"

"I don't need yer help!" Loco Moco snapped. "This monster's nothin' like the others! Y'all have done more than enough already. Go get under the old coot's barrier and calm the brats down!"

"Yes, my lord!"

The monster barked a laugh. "*I don't get you, earth guy! I don't mind all of you coming at me at once, ya know!*"

The evacuation had finished with no problems. That fact assured Loco Moco Highland somewhat. However, despite that relief, Loco Moco knew very well that everything weighed on the battle with the monster he faced right now.

The enemy before him was a cyclops that had overwhelmed soldiers and students all by itself. The dungeon master had its sights set on Loco Moco right now. It couldn't be helped since there were very few humans in this school who were worthy opponents in the cyclops's eyes.

At the moment, there still had been no casualties. This was because the cyclops had strictly ordered that so it could enjoy the thrill of the hunt.

"*Come on, earth guy! Go all out! As long as you're dealing with me, the great cyclops, there won't be a massacre!*" The monster guffawed

once again. *“That’ll make you a little more motivated, right?!”*

Loco Moco clicked his tongue. “Darn it, the monsters are even coming from the skies now...”

“Now then, let’s continue with this battle, shall we? But you can run and hide if you want, earth guy! There’s no reason for you to stick to me, after all!”

This monster was so powerful that it was a contender to be in the top three strongest monsters Loco Moco had faced so far, even as a former Royal Knight and former adventurer. On top of that, the monster had gained a great deal of magic resistance because it had eaten the dungeon core. For this former Royal Knight, this monster was his worst nightmare.



“Everyone, enter the barrier! From now on, all of you are banned from leaving this place!”

The third-year students, who had put up a line of defense around the main gates, entered the barrier around the cathedral one after another. Nobles went inside the cathedral itself while the commoners gathered in the square outside. Everywhere inside the cathedral grounds, friends and acquaintances could be seen talking to each other, comforting themselves by talking about when the Order would arrive.

The weaker flying-type monsters outside gave way to visibly stronger ones with tougher bodies as time passed. The gates must have been breached as well because land monsters appeared too. Outside the barrier, it was a literal hell on earth.

“There you are, Alicia. Are you okay?”

“Shuya!” Alicia exclaimed.

“I’m fine... But look outside. Who would have thought that it would come to this? I heard that the army had very strict surveillance on the dungeon so that monsters wouldn’t come in from the outside, but...it seems that there was a hole in the security.”

Alicia was silent for a moment. “It wasn’t enough. They were too lax. The people in this country don’t know a thing,” she spat.

If they took even one step outside the barrier, then they would stumble into a deadly theme park of monsters. The students whispered to each other that the horde invasion would never have happened if the Adventurers’ Guild were on task.

“But, ya know... Don’t worry, Alicia.” Shuya slapped Alicia’s shoulder encouragingly. She had been shaking like a kitten abandoned in the rain. “The Order is in Yoram, so the princess will surely send over some Royal Knights. I talked a little with the princess when she was here, and she seemed like a kind person, so I’m sure of it!”

“You’re right,” Alicia said slowly. “Thanks, Shuya.”

“Don’t sweat the small stuff.”

Alicia was a very different sight without her usual aura of confidence, but Shuya thought that her fear was only natural in this case. Shuya and all the other students were currently like prey, trapped in a cage. There was no way of escape, and one step outside the barrier meant going into a hellish world of monsters. Even though there were many people crowded into this one place, the mood was so gloomy that it felt more cold than hot. Even the third-years, who would sometimes go outside the barrier to do their best to exterminate the monsters, could only groan in frustration now.

“By the way, I just heard that the Order isn’t the only force in Yoram. The famous Marshal himself is there too, apparently. The *Marshal*, ya know? Duke Denning himself—” Shuya cut off suddenly, petrified as he stared straight at something.

“Shuya? What’s wrong?”

It wasn’t just Shuya who froze. The young nobles in the cathedral all went silent, facing the window with the view to the outside world. Not only that, but the loud and insistent roars of the monsters had stopped too.

“What? What are you looking at?” Alicia asked.

But Shuya could not reply.

Alicia followed Shuya’s line of sight, and...she witnessed the same thing. Something that almost blended in with the night sky. A giant silhouette was hovering still in the air.

“...No way,” Alicia muttered in a stupor.

It was a monster that anyone would recognize. Legends of it were woven into all kinds of texts, from children’s books to historical manuscripts. It was said that humans would understand how painfully weak they were whenever they saw one, and this saying was very accurate.

Humans would be so fragile before those claws shining in the darkness, reflecting the light of the moon. The wide mouth opened wide, and neat rows of teeth gleamed within. Seeing this, Alicia felt cold sweat pour out from all over her body, and her teeth chattered.

“I-It’s a dragon!!!!!!!!!!!!!!” someone shouted.

Dragons were assigned the label of Calamity Species by the Adventurers’ Guild, meaning that they mustn’t be approached. Each student’s reaction to the magnificent monster was different. One fainted out of fear. Another crouched on the ground with all the color drained from their face, half in a daze, cursing the giant monster in the sky. Yet another prayed intently to their deities, while another thought about their family back in their hometown.



However, among them... There was one person who showed a completely different kind of reaction.

“You over there! What are you thinking?! Stop!” A soldier at the edge of the barrier called out, stopping the girl with silver hair in her tracks.

She was in the square in front of the cathedral, and she walked forward with uneven feet, staring straight at the dragon that was nearly one with the night sky. It was a black dragon with a white speck on its chest. There was a burn on its left wing, and there was a deep scar left by something sharp stretching from its forehead to its right eye.

Charlotte had read that specific page over and over again so she could recognize it if she ever encountered it. The dragon looked exactly like the illustrations in the book; the Guardian Dragon of her home country had appeared in the skies above the mage institute.

In the monster encyclopedia she had received from the boy whom she held so much affection and respect for, it had said:

“The Guardian Dragon Sekhmet reduced all monsters approaching the Huzak castle to ash in a single blow.”

Almost as if the black dragon was reenacting the statement in the girl’s memories, its stomach glowed red, and it bellowed a thunderous roar as it spewed out a roaring inferno that enveloped the barrier.

The deafening howl of the dragon was unlike anything the students had heard from the monsters up until now. The sound pierced their eardrums and rendered them frozen in fear, and the flames burned all the monsters near the barrier into a crisp. Monsters shrieked as they were burnt alive. The power of the inferno was enough to immediately shatter any hope of safety or relief.

“Impossible...” Standing on the roof of the cathedral, an elderly man holding an enormous staff saw the beast directly with his own two eyes.

It was the king of the skies who ruled over all monsters. A Calamity Species like this was even treated as a disaster by the superpower Dustour Empire. There, one of the Three Musketeers would immediately go to eliminate it if one were to ever appear in human habitats.

The moment Morozov saw that monster, he knew that there was only defeat ahead. Sensing unavoidable death, the linchpin of the school’s protection and the leader of this school turned away, almost as if in surrender.



The torrential rain was like deafening drumming against the ground.

A student wailed in despair. "It's over. It's all over!"

"Don't come! Don't! Just don't! Everyone's going to die!"

Fear was evident on everyone's faces, and once someone broke the silence with a yell, the madness spread immediately. The chilling reality of their situation had slowly taken a firm root in their hearts. The people inside the barrier had been overtaken by panic time and time again, but at this point, they no longer had the energy to keep up a front, and nobody tried to hide their fear.

Alicia stepped outside the cathedral. She felt the rain lash against her. It almost gave her the delusion that all warmth was ebbing away from her body.

"It's all over..." she muttered.

"Don't say something so silly, Alicia! Help will definitely come immediately, I'm sure of it!"

"Shuya, these are some extraordinary circumstances we are in. It's different from normal."

"Different? What do you mean?"

"The monsters swarmed the school, but surely some of them are heading towards Yoram too. The forest path is probably filled with monsters, and it would take more time than normal for people to cross." The foreign princess gave a rundown of the situation with a steady tone. However, her words were like a death sentence that crushed their hopes.

She continued. "If they start organizing the army to rescue us after our crisis has been reported, they won't make it in time. Even if the famous Order headed here immediately, they wouldn't make it here quickly enough either. But that isn't all. Right now, the Little Daryth is in Yoram. If they heard reports of the black dragon, then the Order would put all their efforts into protecting *her*. The Order belongs to the royal family, after all, so it's out of the question for them to dispatch troops our way. You would know the intricacies of such things better than me, Shuya."

Shuya also knew all this very well. The Order existed for the sake of the royal family, and that was why Shuya had wished to join the army instead so that he could help the common folk living in this country. His father had urged him to return to Newkern lands immediately after graduation, but he didn't want to walk a path paved by somebody else forever. That was why he had become an adventurer.

"Alicia, if everything you said is right, then... What do we do?" Shuya asked helplessly.

"Oh, silly Shuya. That's why I said it's all over... But there is a bit

of a silver lining.”

“Silver lining?”

“With the exception of the dragon’s first attack, it doesn’t seem like it’s planning on attacking us.”

“That’s... You’re right.”

After the first strike, all the black dragon had done was hover in the sky and watch over the situation. It didn’t seem like it had any hostility towards the cathedral, and Alicia was also right in saying that the dragon didn’t seem to intend on moving at all after the earlier attack.

That first strike was probably a way for it to declare its arrival. A warning shot. However, the power behind that attack was immeasurable, and it brought devastating results. In fact, the barrier had even disappeared for a moment because it couldn’t withstand the might of the inferno. The barrier had been immediately cast again, but in that brief moment, everyone definitely saw the shadow of death hanging over them.

“But, *that thing* over there... It’s very easy to read, unlike the black dragon,” Alicia muttered.

The cyclops she referred to laughed in delight. “*Whoa, what a tough barrier we have here!*”

The monster’s voice, dripping with resentment, could be heard from outside. Even if the dragon didn’t plan on attacking, it was only a matter of time before the other monster did. Looming over the barrier, the cyclops swung its right arm, punching the barrier repeatedly. With each blow, its fist thumped against the barrier with a muffled thud.

Nobody knew how long it would be before the cyclops would destroy the barrier. The shadow of death that the dragon had brought down upon them earlier now slowly changed into a torturous countdown as the monsters surrounded the barrier. The beginning of the end was nigh. If the barrier disappeared again, for even one second, with another blast of flames... That time, it would truly be the end of it all.

“*Come out, earth guy! You’re the only one who can put up a proper fight in here!*” The cyclops’s voice dripped with curses as it reached Alicia’s ears. The huge monster continued to attack the barrier impatiently.

At this point, the cathedral was no longer a safe haven but a prison. The barrier was their cage before an audience of monsters. The monsters rattled it around them, eager for the moment when the bars would finally break.

Their howls were muffled by the sound of rain. The crowd of

humans in the prison hugged each other and closed their eyes, not wanting to see anything. Their faces were twisted with fear, drained of color and stricken with fright.

If it had to come to this, I'd rather just get it over and done with, they thought. Their hearts were all long past their limits, so much so that they thought being destroyed by the black dragon in one blow would have been the better outcome. Nobody in this world could blame these people for this moment of weakness.

"Hey, Shuya."

Shuya hesitated. "What?"

"That black dragon... Doesn't it look like it's waiting for someone?"

"Waiting? For who?" Shuya furrowed his eyebrows.

"I wouldn't know. I just couldn't help but think that, because it looks like it is."

Alicia looked at her surroundings. She was surrounded by people with lowered heads. Out of reflex, she looked for a certain boy among the crowd...but she immediately remembered that he had gone to see the Little Daryth off in Yoram.

What is he doing right now? Alicia wondered. *The duke is in Yoram right now too. Are they rejoicing in their reunion, perhaps?* However, Alicia couldn't imagine the pair getting along. Maybe that was because the boy had always been scolded by the duke in her memories.

"Hey, come on out! What happened to that big mouth of yours earlier, earth guy?!"

Mustering all the strength it could, the cyclops continued to punch the barrier with its right arm, never getting tired of this act. So far, despite the fact that it only looked like a thin membrane in the air, the barrier had shown great resilience. No matter how many times the monsters attacked it, it hadn't seemed to weaken at all.

However, now, a small crack appeared in it. This was the first time that the monsters' attacks were effective.

"Oh, hell yeah!" The cyclops smirked. *"Well, well, seems like I only have a little more to go!"*

A booming, rattling sound rang out, sending vibrations through the surrounding air. Sensing the barrier was about to give way, the cyclops put its weight into its punches. With the power of the walking dungeon piling on top of the damage from the black dragon, the barrier was about to give out. The many humans inside could only helplessly watch this monster from the corner of their eyes, unable to bear looking at it directly.

“That’s a big yikes, you old coot. This is way worse than bad,” Loco Moco addressed the headmaster. Even though he was a former Royal Knight, the large, seemingly endless swarm of monsters surrounding the barrier was a sight that he could barely stand to look at.

However, Loco Moco didn’t bother looking at the dragon hovering in the sky at all. *That thing isn’t somethin’ we can deal with. It’s outta the question.* At the same time, he cursed the Dustour Empire, muttering that the country was insane since it fought beings like this on a daily basis. Then, he nodded to himself, thinking, *Well, I guess it makes sense that the north would wanna invade the south, huh?*

“I dunno what that dragon’s thinkin’, but that isn’t the only problem. That monster that’s still attackin’ the barrier and makin’ such a fuss about it... It really lives up to its name as the one-eyed giant,” Loco Moco muttered to the headmaster. “Not only that, but a big portion of your power was spent on that *Dragon Breath* earlier, right?”

The cyclops cackled mockingly from outside. “*Come on and come out, ya hear me?!?*”

Loco Moco glared at the right arm of the bloated, overgrown cyclops. He sensed a great magic resistance in its right arm. *It’s probably a special trait it gained from absorbing the dungeon core. A Unique Origin*, he noted.

With every blow from the cyclops’ fist, the barrier weakened and lost its durability bit by bit. Now, every blow tore open new fist-sized holes in the barrier. The holes were immediately repaired, but that meant a great amount of mana was being spent in the process of doing so. These holes weren’t due to any fault in the quality of the barrier. Instead, it was that the power of the dungeon master was so extraordinary it was giving the Archmage a run for his money.

“That cyclops is literally a walking, talking dungeon...” Morozov muttered.

“That’s a monster that ran down here from the north. It’s oddly used to combat against humans, so I’m sure it’s gotta be.”

“And how is it on your end, Loco Moco? Do you think you can defeat it? If you did, the remaining monsters would probably lose some steam.”

The two looked down from their spot on the cathedral roof towards the cyclops, which was still punching away.

“If I fight it one-on-one and aim for both of us to take each other out at the same time, then there’s a slight chance... I see. So this is where my journey ends, huh?”

The headmaster was silent for a moment. “I am very sorry, Loco

Moco.”

Hardening his resolve, Loco Moco opened his eyes. “I don’t mind at all, old coot. This is my job, after all. Ya know, it was really fun. This job was much more fittin’ for me than my time in the Order. On top of that, I was able to meet the princess, so I have no regrets. Honest.”

There was a strong bond of trust between the elderly man and the gifted man he had headhunted from the Order.

Those few moments Loco Moco took to harden his resolve had seemed like an eternity to him, but even that was over. And now, the Guardian of Kirsch in *Shuya Marionette* leaped down from the roof of the cathedral. He slapped students he knew on the back in reassurance as he began walking towards the outside of the barrier.

Loco Moco had no regrets. After all, during the dungeon expedition while the princess was at school, she had even shown her approval of him.

“Heck yeah! You finally came out, earth guy! But I’ve already seen through your tricks! Now, how are ya going to deal with me, huh?!”

Once again, Loco Moco faced the cyclops that was probably several times as big as his own body. The black dragon was still in the sky, but Loco Moco wouldn’t fight it. Unless the entirety of the Order of Royal Knights was here, there was no way the dragon could be defeated. However, if Loco Moco defeated this walking dungeon, the barrier would stay up at the very least.

“I’ll kill you. That’s all,” he hissed.

In this way, the Guardian of Kirsch Mage Institute began his one last stubborn stand.



“You’re not half bad, earth guy!”

The former Royal Knight squeezed out the last of his strength to fight the cyclops, and Loco Moco was on the full defensive. Dirt rose from the ground into lifeless golems that were crushed again and again by the cyclops. On top of that, the cyclops wasn’t the former Royal Knight’s only enemy as a swarm of monsters joined the fray. Sharp claws split his skin and he was wounded all over. Countless times, sounds of strikes would be muffled by his body as they landed, and in the end, Loco Moco sank to the ground.

There was no way that the students inside the barrier could look away from the man who was fighting to protect them with his life on the line.

“Professor!” they all shouted.

“You’re finished! I’ll kill you first! Prepare yourself!”

The cyclops slowly approached Loco Moco Highland, who had

collapsed into a clump of mud. However, no one had yet realized that this was the ending Loco Moco had hoped for.

Everyone inside the barrier screamed and stared at the bloodthirsty monsters outside. They waited with bated breath for the moment they could unleash their pent-up ferocity. At this point, the terrified screams only fueled their hunger, and countless pairs of red eyes stared intently towards the cathedral as they drooled. On the cathedral roof, Headmaster Morozov shook his head, looking pained.

The black dragon remained still as always, hovering in the same spot in the sky.

To add to all this despair, the cool rain ruthlessly drained warmth from the humans, chilling them to the bone. Someone sobbed as they screamed, “Hey, black dragon! What in the world is someone strong like you thinking?! Are you looking at us and laughing at how pathetic we are?!”

Charlotte was rooted to the spot as she continued to lock her eyes with the king of the skies waiting above her. The low rumbles of the dragon’s breath seemed to echo in her heart, and she couldn’t look away from the dragon’s red eyes.

In the book her master had gifted her, it said that her ancestor had protected everyone by giving up her future in exchange. *The princess back then probably felt the same as I do now*, she thought.

“...Oh, I see.” All the princesses of the past had probably made up their minds after seeing an inferno like that. It would be a steal if giving up her own future could save everyone else.

That was why Charlotte, too, made up her mind. She was a pathetic person who had never managed to accomplish anything up until now, not even once. *Yet there’s still something I can do, even though I’m such a good-for-nothing. If that’s the case, then...*

Charlotte Lily Huzak hardened her resolve and made a solemn vow in her heart. She raised her face, wet from the rain, and walked forward. Her vision was blurry, and she couldn’t see very well, but she could still clearly make out the people shaking from the cold, the battered soldiers with wounds all over, and Lady Alicia with Shuya, leaning into each other.

Lately, there had been signs of her master’s former fiancée getting back on good terms with her master. Charlotte couldn’t imagine how much grief Master Slowe would be in if Lady Alicia was gone.

“H-Hey, what are you—” A soldier tried to stop the girl who started walking past him, but...

“Don’t stop me. Even if I might not look it, I *am* Master Slowe’s retainer.”

To the soldiers, House Denning was the absolute word of law.

Nobody would lift a finger to stop the girl in her tracks. Thus, Charlotte stepped forward once again, heading outside the barrier.

Had she gone crazy from being so afraid for so long?

“Hey!”

“That girl’s—”

“She’s Denning’s retainer.”

“The Piggy Duke’s—”

Everyone in the barrier thought that this was practically a suicide attempt.

“Well now, who would have thought that an idiot would come out of their own will? Y’all, don’t touch that human. She’s my prey!”

An absurd number of monsters opened up a path towards the dungeon master, and they all stamped their feet in excitement. These monsters were all agitated, and the sound of grinding sharp teeth echoed out into the nighttime campus.

“Denning’s retainer?! Why?! Why did you come out?!” the defeated former Royal Knight shouted.

However, she did not answer his question. She pressed on. There was no escape. Everyone had already given up, bowing their heads and resigning themselves to their fate.

Yet, the girl didn’t stop moving forward.

Once upon a time, she had run away in Huzak. That had been the only way for her to carry on. However, things were different now. Running away wasn’t the only option she had.



She knew that sometimes, a happy, everyday life could suddenly shatter into nothing.

“...In the end, I never managed to tell him the truth.”

There wasn't anything that would make her happier than being able to save everyone with her power. If she'd had to pick one regret, though... *I wanted to say goodbye to him.*

“Master Slowe, I... There's something I've kept secret from you all this time,” she whispered.

The princess of a destroyed country, whom nobody knew about, locked eyes with the Guardian Dragon of her home country, which continued to wait for her decision.

Wyverns glided in the sky as Inferno Monkeys leaped across the land. Mad Worms with eerie compound eyes sunk their teeth into rabbits as they wriggled around. Their eyes glinted with predatory instinct, seeking even bigger prey.

Even though Charlotte was surrounded by horrific monsters looking at her on all sides, her heart was calm. Only the black dragon seemed real to her, and she stared at it alone. No other sound registered in her ears. Just like back then, her vision blurred, and...

“Jeez, what is Miss Charlotte doing?!” Tina yelled. “She's awful at magic, but she's putting herself into way more dangerous situations than me! But, well, it's my turn to save her this time, so—” The words of the promising star of hope for the commoner students cut off as someone grabbed her arm in a tight hold. “Huh?! Ow! Wh-What?!”

For some reason, the person grabbing her arm was the brash noble boy with red hair. If the worst problem student in Kirsch was Slowe Denning, then Shuya Newkern was a good contender for one of the most eccentric.

“Hey, commoner, what in the world are you thinking?!” he yelled.

“Ow, that hurts! What am I planning on doing?! That girl... Miss Charlotte is my friend!” Tina exclaimed.

“I was just about to go save her myself!” Shuya snapped. “You're a commoner, so get out of the way!”

“You *what*? What's with that logic?! Not only that, but you're shaking more than me. What do you think *you* can do?!” Tina accused. “Also, it really hurts, you know! Quit the useless talk and let go of my arm! Miss Charlotte is a very, very precious person to me!”

“Hey, Valjean! You're friends with this girl, right?! I'll save Denning's retainer, so keep her at bay! She's serious about this!” Shuya exclaimed.

There was no way anyone could save the retainer of Slowe

Denning. Shuya didn't have to put it into words, and he knew that fact very well. Since he had been so shocked that he wasn't able to move when the retainer had gone outside the barrier, there was no way he could let this girl with black hair go outside as well.

"Shuya... Are you planning on dying...?" Valjean muttered.

"Hey, Mister Valjean, please let go of me!" Tina pleaded with him. "If Lord Denning isn't around, then...I'll save Miss Charlotte, you hear me?!"

Even as Shuya was filled with despair, he still pressed on. Shuya Newkern's heart had always been filled with a righteous flame, and right now, he was fueled by that same sense of justice. Seeing this, Valjean went silent.

"Valjean. You're right. I might be mauled to death as you said, but..." Shuya trailed off.

The boy who had been the world's savior in *Shuya Marionette* couldn't stop his body from trembling. He hadn't even shown any signs of awakening his powers, so he wasn't any different from the other students in school at this point. However, even still...

"But there's no way I can just let that girl walk to her death without doing anything about it. After all, if there's one thing I know..."

The boy, who had the aptitude to save a world, would act even when the soldiers and crowd of students wouldn't. After all, even now, new monsters joined the swarm outside one by one without any end in sight. However, Shuya Newkern would not stop here. Valjean Greatlorde could do nothing but stare at this youth. To Valjean, a minor character who didn't even appear in the anime, Shuya Newkern's bravery was blindingly brilliant in his eyes.

Shuya continued. "That girl starts practicing magic super early every morning, and... Ya know, I just can't help myself when I see something like that."

Valjean wasn't able to come up with a reply.

Surely, this nature of Shuya Newkern was the exact reason why Eldred, the Great Spirit of Fire, had chosen this boy.

"Stop, Shuya!"

"...Huh?" The crystal ball had been his tool for divination, which he used to earn a few pennies on the side...but now it spoke. He still hadn't realized the truth behind this crystal ball, but it had always been by his side whenever he made a life-changing decision and was a token of courage to him.

"It's coming! Brace yourself!"

However, up until now, he had never heard the voice from the crystal ball speak with clear emotion, not like this.

"What do you mea—" Moments before he could step out of the

barrier, Shuya paused and looked outside.

In the rain, a battered Professor Loco Moco was fighting a monster. He also spotted many silhouettes in the shadows inching forward, sneaking towards the Denning retainer.

“What do I mean, you ask?! Wind! Wind is coming this way!”

Shuya took a moment to process it. “Huh? Wind?”

At that moment, a freezing gust of wind blew past, stealing away his warmth in the literal sense of the word. Spring was over, and summer was nearly around the corner, yet this wind that blew past Shuya was as frosty as ice.

Then there was silence. After one brief moment, that wind that chilled him to his very core blew once more. However, all sound had stopped. *Wait... It's too quiet. Why? The monsters had been so loud all this time, but I can't hear them now,* Shuya thought frantically. A moment later, he realized the reason.

The memorial tablet that had been built in celebration of the school's one-hundred-year anniversary flew into the air, and the school buildings' glass windows all shattered at once.

From within the barrier, Shuya could only watch as monsters smashed against it one after another, their blood gushing out. Red. Crimson. Maroon. The barrier was painted with the color of the monsters' blood.

The view was sickening. Everyone covered their faces with their hands, wanting to shut it all out.

Unable to process what had just happened, Shuya felt the earlier courage within his heart wither. He racked his brain, trying to understand the situation. No matter how much he thought, he just *couldn't*. The protagonist of an alternate world stood rooted to the spot.

“So *that* is why you didn't come out, even in such circumstances! Like I thought, that brat is—”

Not only that, but the voice in his head... There was definitely joy in its tone. *It almost sounds like a real human... What in the world is its source? Who are you? Who is this person in my head?* Shuya was about to ask, when...

A roar cracked the air with its sheer force. The king of the skies, which had been silent up until now, broke the silence with a thunderous howl. The black dragon's stomach glowed once more with a red light.

Before he knew it, Alicia was right next to him, trembling like a leaf. *Alicia, why are you—* Shuya couldn't finish that thought before Alicia looked at him squarely in the eyes, blinking, and cut him off with, “I'd be rather troubled if you died.”

Someone screamed in fear, warning that the inferno was about to come their way again. However, the dragon turned its neck, facing away from the barrier, and aimed its flames towards the forest path down from the main gates.

There was a massive explosion of heat, and Shuya's vision was blinded by the color red. This was different from the last time, though. This inferno wasn't a warning. To Shuya, it looked like an attack with a very clear aim at somebody.

The roar continued, and the flames evaporated the rain falling from the sky. The remainder of the flames crackled in the air. However, the flames were torn apart, almost as if the inferno had come to a hard stop in contact with something invisible, and...

Shuya realized what it was immediately. It was *wind*. A powerful gale had struck the inferno straight on. The roaring wind swirled and mixed with the dragon's flames, and the resulting tempest began razing the school with its sheer force.

The world was locked inside a heatwave. People within the barrier couldn't even open their eyes, too afraid to witness the terrible scene in front of them. While their vision was filled with darkness, they could still hear the sound of sparks crackling somewhere. And then...

"Well, well! I shall see the power of your trump card, my fated rival Altanger!"

"So *that* was an option!" The Archmage continued to uphold the barrier as he stood on the roof of the cathedral with a bulky grimoire open before him. Headmaster Morozov, a guiding light for the next generation who invested his time into the bright futures of the world in Daryth, breathed out a sigh.

The elderly man, whose face was now framed by many strands of silver hair, had left his home country of Minerva and come to Daryth, the leading power of the Great Southern Alliance. He'd decided that he wanted to spend his short time remaining educating youngsters, the future of this world. This was on top of his position of Archmage in Minerva, the Country of Sorcery, which was also part of the alliance formed to defend against the north.

By now, a curtain of clouds had been pulled over the moon. But before everything was shrouded in darkness, the headmaster was able to spot the people heading into the school from the surrounding sea of trees.

Seeing the inferno silently seething before his eyes, the man who was one of the three most influential people in Daryth understood exactly what was going on.

"Wonderful! Indeed, if you used *that*, then you could break through the forest path in its current state!" he exclaimed.

He saw a light in the distance. That torrent of green light had clashed head-on with the black dragon's attack. Though it only had been for a brief moment, Morozov could tell what lay beyond it.

Two swift horses rushed through the main gates, and Morozov knew the sword in the hands of that young man who rushed in first very well. It was the sacred sword given to the Guardian Knight.

The Guardian Knight of the current queen was Rudolf Delfrey, the strongest man in Daryth and the headmaster's friend. The sword he had spotted was definitely the same sublime sword that man wielded...but it was different at its core.

"That boy... He managed to reach an ultimate level of magic that only the Great Spirits had reached so far. I see!"

A few years ago, an influential noble had contacted Morozov saying that his son wanted to enroll in this magic institute. Morozov had known the reputation of the boy very well, however, and had been reluctant about it. When he heard that the boy's father would come all the way to the school in person, though, the headmaster had been shocked. The busiest man in the country leaving the front lines was a ridiculous thought.

In reality, however, the man wearing the signature crimson Denning coat did come to the school with a desperate expression that Morozov had never seen on him before. The man who stood on the top of Daryth's noble hierarchy had lowered his head, pleading for Morozov to accept his son. Back then, Morozov couldn't believe that *he*, of all people, would lower his head to make such a request.

"I admit my mistake! You were correct about everything!"

Strength returned to the eyes of this great leader. Seeing the torrent of wind clashing directly with the tornado of flames spewed by the black dragon, Morozov saw the truth with his own eyes. His grimoire had lost its glow before, but it now shone again as the green light crushed the flames of pure red nearby.

"Rejoice, Duke Denning! Your son... He is the real deal!"

And then, just like Morozov had predicted...

The power surging from the Mystical Sword in the commoner swordsman's hand overwhelmed the inferno and smashed the *Dragon Breath* into smithereens.



Charlotte was deep in thought as she felt the rain pour down onto her body like a gushing waterfall from the skies. The situation had completely changed. The black dragon was no longer interested in someone like her. Not only that, but the countless monsters before her had all been taken out in one fell swoop. She didn't know what had

happened, but the one thing she did know was that she had been saved.

“Oh!” Suddenly, at her feet, stood the black cat that had always been by her side.

Back when she’d escaped from Huzak, the cat had appeared out of nowhere and it had shown her the way, even as the people around her dwindled one by one. In the end, she had been caught by evil people, but this precious friend of hers had still remained firmly by her side. She picked up her feline family member and trusted partner, and held it in her arms as its warmth made her confirm that she was still alive. But not only that... *I might be able to sneak back into the barrier with this opening*, she thought.

Her thoughts were interrupted by a loud, shriveled squawk.

“Huh?” Charlotte spun around in the noisy rain.

A tall monster collapsed into a puddle of water with a loud splash, a gaping hole in its stomach. It seemed to have been attacked. *But who?* she thought. Right now, there was practically nobody outside the barrier.

Charlotte saw the person in question earlier than anyone else. There was someone advancing forward despite the rain and the slippery mud. In her tear-blurred vision, she saw that person coming down from a horse. Even though Charlotte’s vision was all twisted and unclear, she immediately realized who it was.

No way. It’s...it’s not realistic. It’s not possible. There’s no way he could return in such a short time. Charlotte’s mind was in shambles. *The forest path is overrun by monsters. It’s raining! How was he able to cross that long path? But...he’s right there. The person in front of me is definitely him.*

Without a doubt, it was the boy she talked to every day, who had always been right by her side. He was her master, who had promised that he would change for the better from now on. He was the son of House Denning, the family that ruled at the top of the rigid aristocracy in Daryth. He was the boy who had been once celebrated as the Prodigy of Wind, and the boy who always accepted Charlotte for who she was without saying anything. The person whom she owed her life to, who was supposed to be seeing the Little Daryth off to Yoram at the moment, was *right there*.

“You—” he began.

His clothes were sullied, and a horrific amount of blood covered him from head to toe. His face was smeared with mud, and he looked completely different from when he had departed the school. For him to look like this...he must have rushed like there was no tomorrow down the forest path.

“What in the world...were you thinking?!” The boy shouted.

He was angry. He had saved her from the depths of despair and had provided time for the Great Spirit of Wind to heal. He had thrown away everything for her sake. Parting with them right now wasn't a reality he could take lying down. After all, the time he'd spent with these two was the whole world to this boy. He wanted to live with these two, even if it meant throwing away his own future, and thus...

"What were you thinking when you went outside the barrier?! I've been wanting to point this out for a while, but you are way too thoughtless!"

This boy, who'd secretly fought against the Dustour Empire all by himself in the shadows in the world of *Shuya Marionette*, was livid.

The princess of the destroyed kingdom of Huzak had never seen him like this, not even once. In her long time as his retainer, he had always been kind to her. On top of that, Charlotte didn't even know *why* he was mad at her right now.

"I'm confiscating this wand!" he yelled.

"Hey!" she yelped.

It seemed to her that he was angry at Charlotte because she'd gone outside the barrier. However, she'd had good reasons for doing that. *If I make a request to the dragon in the sky, everyone will be saved. He doesn't know how much conviction I had when I came outside the barrier.* Because of this, before she could rejoice in their reunion, she first felt offended.

"U-Um, I do think that I was brash in coming out of the barrier, but... I... I-It's not like I didn't have a plan..." she stammered.

"A plan?! I know what you're about to say! You were planning on being a tragic heroine like in those books you like, weren't you, Charlotte?!"

He doesn't know anything, that's why. He doesn't know the secret of that dragon in the skies, nor my true identity. He doesn't know anything, and that's why he can say something like that, she thought.

"T-Tragic heroine?! Y-You don't have to put it like that! I *can* actually save everyone! I'm actually a super special person!"

"You? Saving everyone? And super special, you say? You're a loser mage, what do you think *you* can do?!"

"L-Loser?! M-Master Slowe, so you *do* think I'm a loser mage, just like everyone else! You're awful! I'm done with you! Master Slowe, get out of the way!"

"No way in hell am I going to do that! If I let you go right now, then everything up until now would be for nothing!"

She had never doubted the fact that her secret was her own. When the duke had allowed Master Slowe his wild request and let Charlotte

become an official member of House Denning, Charlotte had had suspicions that the duke was onto her. However, she had been worried for nothing, for she'd immediately realized that the duke was only indulging Master Slowe.

"It's not just my hard work at stake, but *your* hard work will also mean nothing, Charlotte! You kept your real identity secret for House Denning's sake, but your silence will be rendered useless if you do this!"

Thus, Slowe's words were like a bolt from the blue to her.

She had thought countless times about telling him, but she had stopped herself each time. If her identity was public, Daryth would gain a just cause to start a war. She would be a symbol for the recapture of Huzak, and humans would surely start invading her homeland, which was overrun with monsters. And then, the people of House Denning would lose their lives for her sake.

"That's why I definitely won't back down. Charlotte, I swore I wouldn't lose you a second time." With steely conviction in his eyes, the boy looked at the girl. Within the blazing inferno, the boy renewed his vow to her. Nobody would know how truly meaningful his words were.

"More importantly, Altanger! What were *you* doing?! Why are you in a place like this? Fight, darn it! Charlotte is the most important to you, isn't she?! Don't be such a scaredy-cat just because you lost against monsters once!"

Seeing Slowe Denning talking to the cat in her arms as if he was a human, Charlotte didn't know how to react. "Um, Master Slowe... Who are you talking to?"

She knew that he treated her cat like a demon cat sometimes, but she could never have imagined that her master would talk to him so directly.

Charlotte had no way of knowing this, but the boy had always fulfilled the unreasonable demands of the Great Spirit of Wind. If the spirit wanted to eat the delicacies of the world, the boy would obtain them without fail, even if it was by force. If there was anyone who ruffled the spirit's feathers the wrong way, he would get rid of them through peaceful means. The boy had endured an extraordinary amount of hardship all by himself up until now.

"You put so much pressure on me and intimidate me alone, but you're always slacking off..." Slowe muttered with bitterness. "I can't take it anymore! Fine! Just stay there. I'll get rid of that dragon, that thorn in my side!"

Having had his say, the boy walked off.

"Um," Charlotte muttered, confused.

He waved his right hand in the air, and the clouds parted

immediately, moonlight illuminating the school. Charlotte was thrown off by it all, but the most curious thing to her was...

"Slowe, that dragon was lured here by the scent of a perfume that Charlotte sprayed, meow."

"I see... Well, back me up, at least. You should be able to do a trivial thing like that, even from that spot."

"I will, meow. Also, I wasn't a scaredy-cat or anything, meow."

"...Huh?" Charlotte looked down at the cat in her arms, dumbfounded.

Though the sound he'd made sounded like a cross between a human's voice and an animal's purr, he had definitely been speaking real words. *The warm kitty in my arms just... He just spoke my name, and apparently, he wasn't a scaredy-cat. Wait... Wait. Was that voice just now*

"Al, did you just speak?"

"I'm actually fluent in human, meow."

Charlotte was stunned speechless for a long moment. "Huh?"

The beautiful princess froze like a statue. To put it simply, her brain was short-circuiting.



Until just a few moments ago, the humans inside the barrier had been stricken with fear. They had given up on all hope of living, even hoping for the dragon to put them out of their misery in one blow.

With the moon appearing once again from behind the clouds, its light shone down upon the whole campus.

Joy danced in the students' hearts as they cheered in silence and watched the events unfold before them. Someone stood with their back turned to the students, backlit by the moonlight, so they could see only their silhouette.

"Heinz!" he shouted. "Do not let any of the soldiers go outside the barrier!"

"But, Young Master!" the captain protested.

"This is an order! It is your job to watch and report my bravery to my father afterward!"

"Yes, sir!"

Everyone inside the barrier had the same question in their mind: *Are we dreaming right now?* Once the darkness gave way to light, the situation had completely changed. Help had come, and these sudden reinforcements were even titans in their own right.

"Milord! I can wield this sword probably one last time!"

"Silva, do you see that cyclops?! That is the dungeon master which started this horde invasion! I want you to use your last swing to take it out! Can you do it?!"

“Yes, I can! Please leave it to me! Milord, please take care of the monsters around here!”

The cyclops had been blown away by the tempest earlier but it had returned to the battlefield. The monster, a natural-born warrior, stared at the swordsman heading its way before roaring with laughter.

“I’ve seen that man somewhere before!!!!!!” a student shouted.

“Hey, look! That guy is holding the Mystical Sword!”

“Heinz, keep everyone inside!” the boy demanded. “Don’t let anyone slip through!”

“Yes, sir! I would not let anyone get in the way of the Young Master!”

The students’ earlier despair dissipated without a trace as monsters fell, one by one. Fire. Water. Earth. Wind. Light. Dark. Spells of all colors and elements weaved together like a scene taken straight out of a fairy tale, and nobody could utter a word before this otherworldly sight.

But they should have known. This was the power of the third son of House Denning, the boy whose abilities had been the topic of rumors after he had captured that mercenary. They should have long realized how extraordinary this boy was. This was the boy who broke the historical record scores for several tests when he sat for the Kirsch Mage Institute entrance exams, after all.

“You! How dare you!!!!” the cyclops roared with fury. *“How dare you strike me!”*

The cyclops was being led around by the nose. The swordsman with the Mystical Sword had carved a wound into the monster’s body; the first it had sustained ever since it became a dungeon master. Seeing red, the monster distanced itself from the swordsman and took deep breaths. This act alone was enough to heal its wound, but the swordsman didn’t seem fazed at all.

“Hey, Loco Moco. ‘S been a while.”

Loco Moco Highland had made a narrow escape from death, and the professor groaned in frustration. He was stunned silent when he saw the sword in the swordsman’s hands. It was a sword that symbolized way too many things to a Royal Knight, but there was something different about it.

“...I heard that you became the top candidate, but...that isn’t the power of light, is it?” Loco Moco said with conviction.

“Nope. It’s the only Mystical Sword of Wind in this whole entire world. Isn’t it awesome?”

“So Denning changed the core of the sword, huh...? He really is a ridiculous brat, and completely out of his mind at that. That thing is a national treasure! Silva, you’re not off the hook either. Do ya *know*

what ya two did?"

"I'm probably going to be treated as his accomplice. I'm prepared for the consequences."

"You..."

Silva was a friend of Loco Moco Highland from back when they'd been adventurers, but this was the first time he had seen that expression on Silva's face. Changing the element of the Mystical Sword was practically asking for certain death from a blasphemy charge, but Silva's face was lit up in excitement.

Indeed, the only emotion in Silva's heart was joy. During their journey along the forest path, Silva had realized a very important fact. Everyone had once thought the boy now called the Fallen Prodigy of Wind was a special being who didn't have the same desires as a normal human. But seeing the boy's desperation, Silva had finally understood him. The boy had found something more important to him than everything he could gain in House Denning.

Thus, Silva was over the moon. He was elated. His lord, who had been called the Prodigy of Wind... *It had never been a big deal. He's only head over heels for a girl, and that's all there is to it.*

"You two vermin... I'll kill you both at once! I'll tear you into pieces!"

"Loco Moco. It okay if I beat up that guy?"

The swordsman had his back turned to the cyclops. Seeing this as an opening, the monster charged towards the swordsman of wind. Laughing out loud and sure of its victory, it shouted, "*Your back is wide open!*"

The swordsman saw the nod from his old friend. Then, without even taking a moment to gauge the distance between the monster and himself, he turned and immediately swung his sword. He already knew how to handle the power of the Mystical Sword and how its magic felt.

"You damned idiot," Silva hissed. "We're in the middle of talkin' here, ya know?"

He channeled the magic imbued in the sword, and it transformed into an explosion of wind. The cyclops received a direct blow from the wind at point-blank range, and its face twisted with confusion. "*No way... There's no way that someone great like me would—*"

Its feet, which had been sturdily planted on the ground, lifted into the air...and the cyclops was blasted away spectacularly.

"—lose in a battle of strength!!!!!!!!!!!!!"

With fierce momentum, the cyclops was sent flying and it broke the wall of the school building as it crashed through. The swordsman chased after the dungeon master and entered the building himself.

A great deal of dust and rubble went flying out from inside the building, followed by a blood-curdling death cry. The dungeon master

never came out from the depths of the school building again, and the swordsman, covered with blood, walked out alone.

It happened so fast that there wasn't even time for the bystanders to imagine what kind of back-and-forth happened inside the school building. That monster was so strong that their professor, a former Royal Knight, hadn't been able to defeat it. The students couldn't believe that this man could finish it off so easily, but the evidence was before their very eyes.

"That guy... He killed the cyclops, huh?!"

"The dungeon master is dead!"

"Who is that?! Is he a Royal Knight?!"

"Look! The monsters are slowing down now!"

"Yahoo!"

The students cheered as they stared in awe at the swordsman. It was an extremely rare occasion for nobles to praise commoners, but this youth was so talented that these young nobles simply had to acknowledge him.

This commoner with black hair, who had left many Royal Knights in the dust as he climbed all the way to the top candidate for Guardian Knight, carried the glowing sword with him as he stood next to the boy with whom he had traveled the forest path.

"Milord, my job is done, but I am at my limit. And it seems that this sword... It is also at its end."

At that point, there were no monsters left standing at all. The swordsman of wind pointed his Mystical Sword at the black dragon hovering in the sky, then let his arm fall to his side.

"I see. You have done well. Leave the rest to me."

Silva was silent for a brief moment, then he said, "Yes. Please show me what you can do, milord."

As the crowd began to cheer, Silva shrugged his shoulders. And just like that, the commoner swordsman, one-half of the Knights of the Twin Wings, had fulfilled his role.

Final Chapter: A New Future

No matter how many monsters were massacred below Sekhmet, it didn't move at all, not even its expression. *Like I thought, it doesn't seem to see the land monsters as its comrades. I see.*

The Guardian Dragon of Huzak had stood between humans and monsters in the past, and I wondered what it was thinking now that the country it ought to protect was destroyed.

"A powerful dungeon master appeared, then a horde invasion poured out from a dungeon... Jeez, it somehow all ended up just like what Alicia had said. I guess I'll have to brace myself for at least one punch from her..."

During my journey through the forest path, I had thought about why the horde invasion had occurred, but I'd finally figured out the reason after hearing the Great Spirit's words.

That perfume they said that Charlotte had used... I fought the urge to facepalm. No matter how you look at it, it's definitely the Pendragon perfume.

Once upon a time, there was an item made for a specific jinx which put ancient dragons to sleep, since dragons did as they pleased and razed the world rampantly. The secret Pendragon heirloom was made using a tiny drop of that very liquid, which was then mixed with foreign matter. *But who would have thought that the perfume would summon the legendary Sekhmet?*

Silva, who had done a wonderful job at defeating the cyclops, walked away from me and kept his distance. "Milooord! Go wiild," Silva said cheerily.

"That guy..." I muttered. "Can't he be serious for once?"

Now that the dungeon master was defeated, the monsters had begun their retreat. There was only one monster left, and it was *that* thing floating in the sky. It was Sekhmet, the tragic monster who'd devoted everything it had to a person who could never ever return its feelings.

I didn't know whether it was because Sekhmet hadn't reached the happy ending it had wished for, or because of a request from the princess, but the pitiful monster had continued its obsession as the years went by and turned towards her descendants as well. The dragon was now the epitome of an obsessive stalker, but there was no

way I could laugh at or mock the life it led. After all, I knew of a giant idiot who led a very similar life.

“Now then, was my spell to your liking?” I muttered at the black dragon. The strange monster, which had watched over Huzak all this time, simply stared at me with its red eyes.

I continued. “I don’t know what happened to you, and I don’t want to find out either. However... You want to steal away even Charlotte, who has the blood of the woman you loved. Isn’t that too selfish a wish?”

This eccentric being had yearned for every generation of the princesses from the now destroyed kingdom. Those princesses had been called the Royal White Lilies. I inhaled deeply before the creature that would have never shown up in the anime world. The many eyes on my back and the prayers of hope I could hear provided me with strength. *There’s no way I will let you just show up at this hour and snatch her away without doing a thing.*

The monster acted as if it was the king of the skies, and its crushing aura made it feel like it was indeed the supreme ruler right now, but that was wrong.

“Sekhmet, you can’t move, can you? But this is only the beginning.”

The winds are crying, you know? You’re pushing down on them with brute force. Against their will.

“My first encounter had been with a wind spirit. Maybe because of that, I know how the wind feels.”

There wasn’t any grace in its actions. If I had been a professor grading its performance, I would have given it a big fat zero. I stomped into a puddle full of mud, and the coolness of the water cleared my mind.

“Armor of wind, shackles of wind. Gather in the sky, and give it your burden.”

I kept my eyes trained on the black dragon. The light spirits illuminated my target with an amazing show of light, almost as if they were saying, “Don’t you dare make excuses for failure like, ‘It was dark, so I couldn’t see it!’”

Jeez. It’s so bright that I’m almost able to see too much, I thought with exasperation.

“Town of wind, castle of wind. Grow heavier, and heavier, and even heavier.”

A refreshing breeze swept through my heart. Seeking to cast a single strike infused with all of my body and soul, I swung down my wand.

“Forest of wind, world of wind. That ends this tale, and you shall fly no more.”

The dark skies responded to my gaze, and the night listened to my words. The wind spirits were elated at my power and they started rumbling, preparing to eliminate the obsidian invader gliding in the night sky in a deathly dance.

Your speed and your strength as a monster don't matter. I am going to declare this to you, Sekhmet, my pitiful predecessor who devoted your life to your love—

“Gravity Manipulation.”

For the sake of my dream, I shall take you down and gain the title of Dragon Slayer that hangs off your neck.



That scent was the liquid jinx that bewildered my ancient brethren, I see. Who would have thought that it truly existed?

Just as its candle of life was about to blow out, Sekhmet regained its sense of self. It rejoiced in this fortune and slowly fell to the ground. *I thought that the sky was my territory, and yet..* It shook its head wryly in its heart. *I suppose this is the rebellion of wind, huh? I see. It seems that I was quite the sore thumb to the winds. I suppose it's only natural.* After all, it had controlled the spirits by force because it didn't want to be blown away.

However, the feeling of being suspended in the air by some unknown force was oddly pleasant.

It looked to the young boy standing near the girl, almost as if he was protecting her. *You pretend as if it wasn't anything big, but... How much power did you put into this wind, I wonder?* At first, the dragon had thought about going on a brief rampage to test the boy and see whether he was suitable as her guardian, but it seemed that there was no need for such a thing.

Sorry, Lily. I wasn't able to protect the country you loved till the very end. But you know what? I don't think this outcome is so bad. The black dragon accepted its fate and spent its final moments staring at the girl who was staring back at it. The girl was nearly a mirror image of the woman it had loved. It was almost as if Lily had been resurrected into the world of the living, and when it had first seen her, the dragon couldn't help but be filled with glee, even though it was out of character.

Right next to the person who succeeded your bloodline, that would be me, if I were a human.

And in its dying moments, it had seen something truly beautiful. Though it had no regrets, it was envious of the boy's position.

Young man, the glory of being a Dragon Slayer will likely provide you with power. I hope that this life of mine will be of use to you, even if just a little.

When the dragon locked eyes with the boy, it understood what he implied. Even without waving his wand, the boy had been able to chain it to the skies, and while doing that, he'd poured his heart into his gaze. He had replied to the dragon with a silent vow in his eyes, declaring that he would protect her.

Then...it felt that doing any more than this would be simply rude. It felt the strength drain away from its body. Almost as if its duty was over, its life seeped away. With that, Sekhmet's world faded into white, and...

I shall leave her in your hands, Master of Wandless Spells... A mage with no need for incantations...

With nostalgic memories of a certain girl playing out in its mind, the Guardian Dragon of Huzak laid its large body on the ground and silently fell into a deep sleep.



I let out a deep breath. I was utterly exhausted, so much so that I wanted to collapse on the spot and sleep. In the state I was in, even a puddle of mud would probably feel like the greatest bed in the world.

I had used my powers to an extent I never had before. I'd protected Princess Carina and everyone I knew. I'd changed the element of the Mystical Sword. I'd made it down the forest path and decimated the monsters gathered at Kirsch Mage Institute. And finally, I'd made the black dragon fall...

I felt fatigue overtaking my body, and I fought the urge to simply fall forward. My breathing was erratic, and I couldn't even open my mouth properly. My surroundings were dead silent, and I didn't even notice that the rain pelting my body had stopped somewhere along the line. Even so, I dragged my body forward towards the black dragon lying on the ground. *This is my last obligation towards it.*

The closer I got, the more overwhelmed I felt by its intimidating form. It was said that humans had worshipped dragons all the way from the ancient days, and I could see why. The dragon was an extraordinary being that existed on a level far beyond human comprehension, and I instinctively felt like I wanted to cling to and depend on its power.

Not only that, but this dragon was bigger than normal dragons. When it was in its prime, it had been so powerful that it could even drive away armies of monsters from the north all by its lonesome. *Wow. Just wow.* Even though it had been born as the strongest species in the land, this dragon had dedicated its whole life to one single

person and continued to do so even after she died.

Yeah. It was an idiot. Who would go that far normally? But this dragon did it, all the way to the end. That's the exact reason why it had become a legendary Guardian Dragon, whose tales would be told for years and years.

However, the dragon was now dead. Its eyes were closed, and its face was peaceful. I touched its body, but I could not feel even a bit of warmth. This enormous creature would probably never move again. In its last moments, the dragon hadn't even struggled and had accepted its death with open arms. The Guardian Dragon, who had protected Huzak for generations, was no longer anywhere in this world.

I breathed out a sigh. No Face, then Sepith, then the Guardian Dragon. What the hell is going on? There should be a limit as to how hard my life can get, you know! I mean, it would make sense if I had gone wild, doing a lot of things that would affect the future, but all I've been doing is enjoying my school life. But, well... Complaining about all that won't get me anywhere.

Plus, even if I'm exhausted, there's no way I can be so pathetic. For the sake of this dragon as well, which didn't even resist in the end. Not only that...

"He took down the dragon. That guy shot down a Calamity Species!"

"Now he's the second! He's the second Dragon Slayer after Sir Delfrey!"

"Hey, can we go outside too?! Outside the barrier?!"

"No, it's probably still dangerous."

"It's the second Dragon Slayer in Daryth!"

"Look! It's a dragon!"

The school, which had been as silent as still water, was now filled with commotion. I could see everyone from my spot: There was Shuya, standing stupefied inside the barrier around the cathedral. Alicia was strenuously tiptoeing to get a glimpse because she was short. A familiar soldier gave a respectful bow in my direction. Silva and Professor Loco Moco bantered back and forth. And finally, I spotted the headmaster standing on top of the cathedral, looking pleased.

"It's a black dragon! It's bigger than the one Sir Delfrey slew! I've seen that one mounted before so I know for sure!"

"This is insane! How are we even alive?!"

Everyone was so pale moments ago, and yet... They're all so lively now.

Even though I had been such a problematic child, Kirsch had let me in. This school, the paradise which I had chosen in my plan to be

driven out from House Denning, seemed to have become a second home in my heart before I even knew it. If that wasn't the case, then I wouldn't be so happy right now.

Though seeing this made my effort worth it, I couldn't have done this all by myself. Silva had helped me to make it across the forest path. The Great Spirit of Wind had backed me up and helped me to take down the dragon. The Great Spirit probably would say that they didn't do anything, but there was no way that I could have taken down the dragon with one blow on my own merits alone.

"Look! That swordsman is Silva, the top candidate for Guardian Knight!"

"Hey, that's the Mystical Sword at that, like I thought!"

"Professor Loco Moco is alive too!"

"Hey, Silva! You wouldn't understand how I feel; you're the maniac who became an A-class adventurer in only one single year! Not only that, but— Ow! Don't touch me in the side!" Professor Loco Moco complained.

Silva let the professor lean on his shoulder as they walked into the barrier while bickering with each other. *Silva was an adventurer. Maybe he knows the professor from there.* It seemed that the top Guardian Knight candidate was quite the celebrity in Kirsch as well, and a boisterous welcome greeted the two as they entered the barrier.

As for me, I can't just stand around here.

My upperclassmen, who were army hopefuls, held their wands as they began to pick themselves up, but soldiers stopped them. There was no way that these hot-blooded third-years would have sat around doing nothing during this disaster.

When I'd reached the school, Shuya had been about to leave the barrier as well, perhaps trying to save Charlotte. He was technically an army hopeful too. Though he was currently rendered mute from witnessing the fall of a dragon, he should be back on his feet soon.

Not only that, but my father would probably arrive soon from Yoram. Other members of House Denning weren't around, which made sense considering the circumstances, but...there were still a few Denning soldiers in the area. Ones whom he had trained personally ever since they were fresh and green.

In other words, this would be the only chance I had to talk to *her*.

"Are there any water mages here?! Please cast a healing spell on the Young Master!"

I began approaching the girl who had stood as still as a statue this whole time. However, with every step I took, Charlotte's face grew paler and paler.

The Great Spirit of Wind in her arms was snug in its usual spot,

which I was a little jealous of. In contrast, her face was white like ash. She seemed so frail that she was almost like a glass sculpture, one that would shatter with the slightest touch. It seemed that she already had an inkling of what I was about to say.

The Great Spirit of Wind waved its little paw in acknowledgment. It seemed that they weren't angry. It made sense, considering that they'd been bored with the unchanging everyday life here at Kirsch, which was very different from back in House Denning.

"From the looks of it, you've heard everything from the Great Spirit of Wind," I observed.

Earlier, I had talked angrily to the Great Spirit right in front of Charlotte's eyes. There probably wasn't any way to talk myself out of this and feign ignorance. However, I didn't have a single regret in my heart.

"Honestly, I...I don't know where to start," I began.

By telling her the truth, our pleasant everyday life, which had lasted all the way until just a day before, might be gone tomorrow. However...I would tell her everything right here, right now. Telling her now was for my own self-satisfaction. I *knew* that.

"But, well, that dragon was the Guardian Dragon of Huzak, and I have a good guess about why something like that would come to this school."

Back when I had rushed through the forest path, I had thought that I was possibly too late. That Charlotte had already made the same decision as her ancestors, and that she was long gone from Kirsch. The thought of it had torn my heart apart. I didn't want to experience that ever again.

"Charlotte, I know who you are."

The ruckus around us only grew. Even though the area was very noisy, there was pin-drop silence between the two of us.

And then, Charlotte's expression stopped changing. Her heart probably couldn't take it anymore, learning of so many things at once.

We could no longer return to our former relationship. *But...I'll stop waiting for you to speak up first. I'll be the one to confess the truth to you.*

"Ever since the day we met... I knew who you were all this time."

At first, it'd been out of a sense of duty. In my eyes, someone had to help this wounded pair heal their scars. And I'd thought that it was my duty, for I had been blessed with all the privileges one could imagine. There were definitely days when I questioned why *I* had to be the one. I wouldn't deny that.

“I waited all this time for the day when you could take the initiative and tell me the truth. But I’ll put an end to that. Let’s stop deceiving each other.”

But, before I knew it, I had started to wish that I could be with her forever. My heart had been slowly stolen away from me, piece by piece, as I saw how earnest she was and how she had the ability to always see the light at the end of a tunnel. After that, losing everything was no longer a torturous pain to me. However, I was sick of staying in this relationship filled with lies.

Even if she rejects me, I don’t care. But I don’t want us to part with both of us blind to the truth or pretending we don’t know.

“Your name is—”

I released the emotions I had built up and concealed behind a dam in my heart. I let them flow and gush out to the precious girl before me. All these feelings were like precious gems that I had been hiding for a long, long time.

House Denning was the family that had defended Daryth for generations. News of their direct descendant slaying the black dragon spread like wildfire across all the countries in the south and further. The many spies scattered across the continent immediately delivered the news to central figures of the Dustour Empire, which was marching forward with its military might.

At the same time, the heroes who would make their mark in the anime world of *Shuya Marionette*, the people who would become Shuya Newkern’s comrades, as well as a handful of people that even the boy himself didn’t know... As they heard the news of this feat, they remembered the familiar name of a certain someone.

Now, the story of this world had completely shifted off the road that would lead to the anime *Shuya Marionette*. The good-for-nothing son of House Denning had now made a glorious return to the main stage as the second Dragon Slayer under the flag of Daryth, the leader of the Great Southern Alliance.

Afterword

It is summer now, and it is hot. It is...*really* hot. Here comes the season where one cannot sleep unless the air conditioner is on.

But, well, I might like the heat more than the cold. The joy I experience when I go from the scorching heat of the midsummer sun into a department store that's ice-cold from the air conditioner... I cannot even describe how much of a treat that is.

That aside... Lately, I have been spending my time working hard during the day and then dedicating all my time after work on weekdays and holidays to writing. By the time volume three of *Piggy Duke* comes out in Japan, it would probably be just around the time when my summer holidays would be ending. I miss my school days, back when I thought, "Does anyone *really* need this long of a summer holiday?"

Wait, *Piggy Duke* volume three? Since when did *three* books get published? That thought shocks me. Volume one was published in February of this year, so it's been half a year since then. My life has changed very, well, little since then, but wow, a lot of things sure did happen in this span of time...

After *Piggy Duke* started lining the shelves, some of my coworkers would talk to me and say that they bought the book, or they saw the book in bookstores, or other things along those lines. Not only that, but I started getting back in touch with some friends I hadn't seen in a long time. Some people whom I didn't even know would invite me to drinks too, and I also got to know new people.

I am living my everyday life with my share of little joys. How wonderful! These thrills are a blessing in my boring everyday life indeed. This is all thanks to everyone who supports me.

Well, that isn't exactly the only reason, but I will try my best in volume four. Finally, we'll get to the start of the anime timeline in the next volume. The *Piggy Duke* might leave Kirsch Mage Institute...or he might not. The destinies of Shuya and the *Piggy Duke* might cross. Or they might not. The world will expand like crazy from a mage institute in a remote area!

Please look forward to the next volume.
See you again!



3

Carina Little Daryth

The crown princess of Daryth,
the Country of Knights.

A happy-go-lucky
hermit princess.

XXXXXXXXXXXX

Reincarnated
as the **Piggy Duke**

*This Time I'm Gonna ♡
Tell Her How I Feel!*



"That's...
not my
name."

"Slowe
Denning,
you are the
only one
allowed to
proceed
any further."

"Um...
Princess
Carina?"

Sir Dalton
A Royal Knight who serves
under Carina. Also known
as the "One-Strike Knight."

Slowe Denning
The protagonist who reincarnated
into the world of his favorite anime.
The third son of House Denning,
and a problem student of Kirsch Mage
Institute. At least, he used to be...

"...Just one person. I pray that I will be able to tell the truth to Master Slowe alone."

Charlotte Lily Huzak

The princess of the once-great kingdom of Huzak, now destroyed. Currently Slowe's retainer, a far cry from her former royal position.

"Hello. My name is Slowe. What's yours?"
"Can you hear my voice?"

"..."

"Wait, stop! Sorry! That was all my fault, so please don't cry! I'm begging you! If you cry right now, there's a lot of things that could go wrong!"

"..."

"Well now, their battle has been over for quite a while now, so let's go back to my house and have some delicious soup or something."

"..."

"Speaking of which, what's your name?"

"...Charlotte."

"Charlotte, huh? It seems that we have a long relationship ahead of us... Please take care of me from now on."

"...Yeah."





“Charlotte,
I swore that
I wouldn’t lose
you a second
time.”

“...Huh?”

At first, it was out of a sense of duty. In my eyes, someone had to help this wounded pair heal their scars.

And I thought that it was my duty, for I had been blessed with all the privileges one could imagine. There were definitely days when I questioned why I had to be the one. I won't deny that. But, before I knew it, I started wishing that I could be with her forever. My heart had been slowly stolen away from me, piece by piece, as I saw how earnest she was, and how she had the ability to always see the light at the end of a tunnel.

Translator's Notes

Welcome back to your latest edition of Weird Trivia. I'm Zihan, the translator for *Reincarnated as the Piggy Duke*! I'd like to share some background about some of the more obscure terms we had to localize, so let's jump right into it!

Prologue: The Dawn of Upheaval

Charlotte, you are completely surrounded

Slowe says this to Charlotte when he has got her backed into a corner like a villain, but this quote is actually a stereotypical phrase used by police in Japanese TV dramas. There are many versions of it, but the most popular edition is, "You are completely surrounded. Stop your futile resistance and come outside." In TV dramas, it is announced by the police with a megaphone when there's a hostage situation or if a criminal has barricaded themselves somewhere—most often in a bank. It's basically the Japanese edition of "This is the police. We have you surrounded!"

Dokkiri ("filming my reaction")

When Carina shows up out of nowhere, Slowe panics and questions whether it was a *dokkiri*. *Dokkiri* is the equivalent of Western hidden camera TV shows where viewers enjoy the reactions of the cast. The term originates from the verb *dokkiri suru*, which refers to when a person is so shocked that their heart rate rises. After the prank, the instigator would show up and reveal that it was a joke, often with a handheld placard that says "Great Success" accompanied by a specific sound effect of a flourish of trumpets. This sound effect has been coined with the onomatopoeic term *tetteree*, and has gone on to be used as an indication of success or when fortune falls into one's lap.

Chapter 1: The Princess of Daryth

To scatter the spiderlings

Hearing the stamping of Slowe's feet, the people surrounding Princess Carina scattered like dandelion seeds in the wind. The original phrase used here is *kumo no ko wo chirasu* ("as if I scattered spiderlings"), an expression used to describe a large group of people or animals running away in all directions. Pardon the gross imagery, but this expression originates from how spiderlings scatter in all directions when their egg sacs break, either naturally or by an outside force. The huntsman spider is a very good example of this.

Even crying children would be shushed

One of the onlookers in the female dorms claims that "naughty children cower at the mere mention of our name." The original phrase here is *naku ko mo damaru* ("even crying children would be shushed"). It refers to a force or influence that's so strong that even unreasonable crying children would be scared into silence. The term actually comes from Zhang Liao, a Chinese military general mentioned in the *Records of the Three Kingdoms*, a famous Chinese historical text. The people of Eastern Wu feared him so much that whenever a child wouldn't stop crying at night, their parents would say, "Liao is going to come!" to successfully silence them.

Ichiren takushou ("we share our fate with each other")

Slowe says this when Charlotte asks whether it is okay for her to go into the princess's room with him. In general use, *ichiren takushou* means, "no matter what the results are, our fates are shared." Literally, it is written as "putting/leaving [our] lives on one lotus."

It actually stems from a Buddhist term that means "let us meet on the same lotus flower in the Pure Land after our departure from this life," promising a reunion in the afterlife. In Japanese Buddhism, it is believed that people who do good things could reincarnate onto the same lotus as their loved ones in the Pure Land after their death. Originally, the term *ichiren takushou* was only limited to people who had done good deeds, but its meaning changed over time to mean comrades who share their fates, whether the outcome be good or bad.

One common theory for this shift in meaning is due to its usage in plays featuring double-suicides of lovers in kabuki and *bunraku* (Japanese doll theaters) in the Edo period. Lovers who couldn't be

together due to the restrictions of society used this phrase to pray that they could be together in the next life, thus sharing their fate until the very end.

There isn't any island one could cling to

Carina refuses to reply to Slowe when he tries to coax her out of her room no matter what he says, and Slowe thinks about how she wouldn't even give him the time of day. The original term used here is *toritsuku shima mo nai* ("there isn't any island I could cling to"), which refers to a person responding with a cold and thorny attitude. This term has its origins in sailing. In a storm, a ship desperately searches for an island to weather the storm, but if they cannot find one, there isn't anything the crew can do.

Chapter 2: Dungeons and Monsters

***Oyadama* (“boss”)**

Slowe calls the great spirits the *oyadama* (“boss”) of spirits. On a Japanese Buddhist bracelet, the *oyadama* refers to the big bead around which the *juzu* (Japanese Buddhist prayer beads) are centered. From there, the term began to be used for people central to an organization or group. However, it’s usually used in a negative context, often for criminal organizations such as the *oyadama* (“boss”) of bandits or the evil *oyadama* (“boss”). (Funny how Slowe uses this to refer to Altanger!)

Chapter 3: The Awakening of the Guardian Dragon

Kouinya no gotoshi (“time flies”)

Slowe’s time with Carina flew by, and it is described as *kouinya no gotoshi*. *Kouinya* literally translates as “an arrow of light and shadow,” with light referring to the sun and shadow referring to the moon, thus alluding to time. In Japanese, the kanji for “moon” is used for months and days use the kanji for “sun,” and time itself can be referred to as *tsukihi*, using the kanji of “moon” and “sun” together.

As for the whole phrase of *kouinya no gotoshi*, there are several theories on its origins. One theory is that it came from the poem *Youziyin* by Li Yi, a Chinese poet from the Tang dynasty. The last line of the poem roughly states, “Look at how the sun sprints. How different is it from an arrow taut on a bow string?”

Chapter 4: Horde Invasion

***Yatagarasu* (“three-legged crow”)**

The three-legged crow is a mythological god of guidance in Japanese mythology. It is said that Emperor Jimmu, the legendary first emperor of Japan, moved to Yamato province with the guidance of a three-legged crow. The god who instructed the crow is different depending on the text, but it is generally said to have been sent by either Amaterasu or Takamimusubi. Meanwhile, in the *Kumano Sanzan*, the three shrines of Kumano, the three-legged crow is said to serve Susanoo.

The *yata* implies the bird is large with an impressive wingspan. *Yata* means eight *ata*, which is a unit of measurement equivalent to about eighteen centimeters. Thus, eight *ata* would be around 144 centimeters, but in this case it is not used literally. It is similar to how the term *yaoyorozu* (“eight million”) is used to describe infinity or a countless number, usually used in the context of Japanese deities.

Chapter 5: Kirsch Mage Institute

Strangled with floss silk

Being surrounded by monsters, the students in the barrier felt as if they were waiting for a torturous countdown to complete. The original expression here was “as if they were being strangled with floss silk.” This phrase refers to being slowly tormented, or being tormented in an indirect way. Floss silk is a type of silk padding made by simmering silkworm cocoons and stretching the remaining fibers. It has been used for years as stuffing in *futon* and clothes for cold weather. In this case, though, the expression actually refers to the strong and flexible fibers taken from the cocoon itself, which are then made into floss silk. If one were to be strangled by this material, it would be a rather slow and gradual death, hence the “slowly tormented” part of this expression.

As for floss silk, there’s another very special and interesting usage for it. Floss silk was actually used by ninjas to help camouflage themselves when they were making their escape. Specifically when they entered the area under the floor of a building, they would break apart spider webs with a bamboo pole or similar, and then run in the opposite direction, sticking floss silk to the area as they went. The people chasing them would head in the direction of the broken spider webs, thinking that the floss silk was *actual* spider webs and no one had gone that way. Since it was so dark under the floor, it was difficult to tell them apart.

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Reincarnated as the Piggy Duke: This Time I'm Gonna Tell Her
How I Feel! Volume 3
by Rhythm Aida

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